

BUFFALO BILL AS OVERLAND DETECTIVE!

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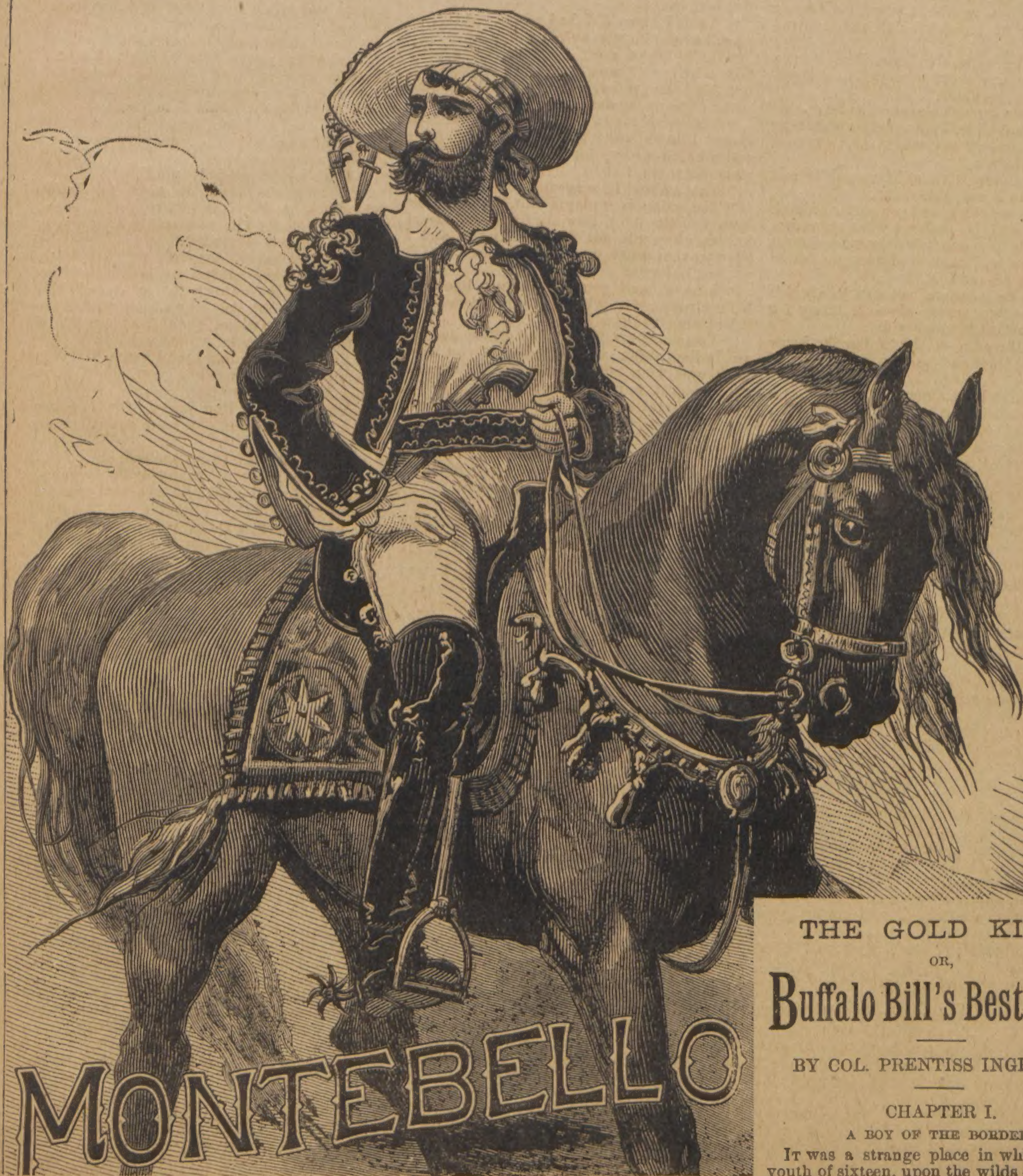
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THE GOLD KING;
OR,

Buffalo Bill's Best Bower

BY COL. PRENTISS INGRAHAM

CHAPTER I.

A BOY OF THE BORDER.

It was a strange place in which to see a youth of sixteen, upon the wilds of the frontier, afoot and alone, with no habitation,

MONTEBELLO

"HE LOOKS, INDEED, THE GOLD KING THEY CALL HIM," SAID BUFFALO BILL.

camp or human being upon whom to call for help within many a long day's tramp.

And yet, the youth thus alone was tramping along at a steady pace, carrying a heavy pack upon his back, a rifle thrown across one shoulder and a belt of arms about his waist, while his face showed no anxiety at his position and his look was one to do or dare.

A handsome, sun-bronzed face was his—fearless, full of indomitable pluck and will, and he possessed a well-knit, wiry, athletic form to stand hardship and suffering to an unlimited extent.

Behind him stretched boundless plains, here and there broken by a rise of woodland, cut by a stream or dotted with a bunch of timber, while before him rose a mountain range sloping to foot-hills and seamed with canyons, and upon all resting a look of intense solitude.

But the youth trudged on steadily, as though anxious to reach the foot-hills, where a stream was visible, before darkness should add to the desolation of the scene.

At last he drew near to this water-course at a point where the bank was heavily fringed with timber, and he said aloud:

"A dandy place for a camp, with grass in plenty."

"What a pity the red-skins killed my pony, for he would have had a feast here—ah! some one is in the timber, for I see a horse feeding there, and he is saddled and bridled."

"I must go slow, for I am likely to run upon road-agents about here just as dangerous as hostile red-skins."

He lay down upon the ground as he spoke, sheltering himself behind a rock, and taking a field-glass that swung at his belt, he turned it upon the timber.

"It is a horse with military saddle and bridle, and he is not staked out."

"I can see no rider, and no other animal, so I guess I will go and see what turns up, for if there is but one it is only man against boy, and I've had that combination before and not been downed."

With this he went on, yet cautiously, his rifle now thrown across his arm ready for use on the instant it was needed.

Reaching the edge of the timber the horse looked up at him and gave a low neigh of pleasure.

"I do believe he is alone."

"Why he is coming to meet me!"

The animal came forward for some distance, then turned slowly and walked away toward the river, as though to avoid being taken.

The boy followed, talking to the horse soothingly, until suddenly he stopped and threw his rifle forward.

He saw a man not far from him, seated upon the bank of the stream and leaning back against a large tree, while in one hand he held a revolver.

The man was a soldier, for he wore the uniform of a sergeant of cavalry, and his eyes were fixed upon the youth with a strange look.

The horse had halted by the side of the soldier, and was rubbing his nose against his shoulder.

"Say, pard, you don't mean shoot, do you, for I'm only a boy?" called out the youth.

"Come here—I am dying—I thought you were my foe; my eyes are so dimmed now I can hardly see."

The man spoke in a low, weak voice, and the youth quickly strode up to him, threw down his rifle and pack and exclaimed:

"You do look in a bad way, pard; but maybe I can help you."

"You can help me by your presence; you can do me a favor Heaven will reward you for."

"I'll do anything I can for you; but you are wounded."

"Yes, the work of an assassin—of one I deemed my friend."

"He learned my secret and sought to kill me."

"He shot me in the back—here is the wound—and when I heard you coming I thought he was come to finish his work, for he is on my trail, I know."

"My noble dumb friend, my horse, led you to me, and, thank God! I have strength yet left to talk to you, though I cannot last much longer."

"He shot me in the back, then my horse

ran off with me, and I came this far, but could go no further, so waited here to face him and death."

"He had to go to his camp for his horse, in order to follow me; but he will soon be here, and—"

"And he will have me to deal with," was the quick response of the plucky boy!

CHAPTER II.

A FIGHT FOR A LIFE.

THE youth had seen a horseman coming through the timber, his body bent, and eyes cast downward following a trail.

In an instant he had seized his pack and sprung behind the large tree against which the soldier was leaning.

On came the horseman, and a closer look revealed a heavily-bearded, long-haired man of large stature, well mounted and armed, and dressed in a combination suit of half-buckskin, half-miner, while he wore a large slouch hat that cast a shadow upon his by no means prepossessing face.

He spied the wounded soldier and called out rudely:

"Hands up, sergeant, or I lets drive a ounce o' lead inter yer carkis."

"I am dying, Brad Dixon, and am unable to raise my hands, so do your worst."

"Is that so?"

"Waal, I know'd I had plugged yer, but wasn't so sure it was as bad as that."

"I'd kill yer now, only I wants a leetle talk with yer," and the man dismounted, but held his revolver cocked and half at a cover of the wounded soldier.

"You wish me to tell you where the gold is that I had already taken out of the mine and hidden away, for you are too lazy to work for more."

"That's about it, sergeant."

"The mine is a-playin' out, but you has been workin' it on ther sly for some time, I knows, afore you got me ter help yer, and I is aware that what you has corralled out of it yer has hid away."

"I have, and you shall never know its hiding-place, for what I found goes as an inheritance to those I love."

"You saved me from being killed once in an Indian fight, when I believed you were an honest man, and a scout at the fort, and so I sought to repay that service by giving you a share of the mine with me."

"You repaid me, when I took you to the mine, by trying to kill me the very next time I came to see you at work, and you have given me my death wound, but you shall never profit by your cowardly act."

"Won't I, and why?"

"I have one to protect me from your coward hand, thank Heaven."

The man laughed rudely at this, and yet glanced quickly about him, as though suspicious that there might be some one near.

But, seeing no one about he continued:

"Waal, I'll give them yer love half what ther mine pans out, ef ye'll tell me whar yer has hid that which yer dug out."

"Never! I would not believe you, Brad Dixon, and now wish that I had been warned when Buffalo Bill told me not to trust you."

"So Buffalo Bill told yer that, did he?"

"Waal, I'll git a rope ter fit his neck some day, for there is men hot on his trail, for he's too dangerous a man to let live."

"Come, I hain't got no time ter lose, so tell me whar ther gold is, or durn me ef I don't scalp yer alive. Does yer hear me talk?"

The sergeant was breathing heavily, his hands lay limp upon each side of him, unable to clasp the revolvers near them.

His face was deathly pale and it was evident that he suffered intensely and was dying, for the red stream of life was slowly ebbing at every hard-drawn breath from the wound in his back, given him by the treacherous ruffian, Brad Dixon.

As the latter spoke he seemed to feel that his victim could make no effort to protect himself, so he replaced his revolver in his belt and in its place drew a long-bladed, ugly-looking knife, as though to carry out his threat to scalp the soldier alive.

He stood some half dozen paces away from him, and, as he made his first step, out from behind the tree suddenly sprung the youth, his revolver leveled, and his words clear and threatening:

"Hands up, old man!"

A bitter oath broke from the lips of the man, and, dropping his knife on the ground, he quickly clutched at his revolver.

Seeing his intention the youth at once pulled trigger, and the right arm of the man was shattered.

"Now, up with that other hand!" cried the youth.

But, the man was game, if bad, and he instantly seized a revolver with his left.

Again the youth pulled trigger, and the man staggered back, evidently hard hit.

But he threw his revolver to a level and fired.

The bullet cut through the youth's hat, and he again pulled trigger, this shot bringing his foe to his knees, yet not disabling him so that he could not fire again.

This bullet tore along the side of the youth, gashing the flesh slightly, but, not hurt badly, or demoralized, he once more fired and with an aim that was deadly, for his bullet pierced the brain of Brad Dixon, who sunk forward upon his face, while the sergeant said faintly:

"That settles him, my brave lad."

CHAPTER III.

THE DYING SOLDIER.

REVOLVER in hand, the youth advanced toward the fallen man, and bending over, touched him on the shoulder.

"He is dead," said the sergeant.

"I shot to cripple him at first, but the last time aimed to kill," said the youth, and he turned the body over and beheld the mark of his bullet in his forehead.

"Yes, he is dead; but I have seen so many Indians and white men play possum I wanted to be sure."

"Now, sir, let me help you."

"Nothing can save me now, my brave lad, and what time is left to me, I must make use of, for I have much to say to you; but are you not wounded?"

"One shot passed through my hat here, sir, and another grazed me a little on the side; but it is nothing to cry over," and opening his shirt the youth saw where the bullet had torn along, just drawing blood and leaving its track.

"You are fortunate, and were brave to face him as you did, when you could have killed him from ambush."

"You have an iron nerve, for I never saw a finer duel, and you were as cool as an icicle."

"It was no time to get excited, sir. I did not wish to kill him, richly as he deserved it, but he forced me to do so—but you are suffering, sir."

"Yes, these spasms of pain are becoming more frequent and severe, so I must talk now while I can, for I have something to tell you of importance."

"Sit here."

The youth first handed him his canteen of cool water from the stream, then made his position more comfortable and took a seat by his side.

The sergeant gazed into his handsome, fearless face, and asked:

"Who are you, my lad?"

"My name is Sherman Canfield,* sir, and I am a border boy."

"Your looks and actions prove that! but are you alone here upon the frontier?"

"Yes, sir, I came out with a party of gold-hunters, leaving a happy home in search of adventure and fortune as many boys often foolishly do, and I am now on my way to seek help for the few of the party who remain, for bad luck has dogged us, we have found no gold, the Indians have killed half of our number, and others are lying wounded in camp."

"I volunteered to go for help, and the Indians killed my pony; but I escaped and have tramped it for the past few days."

"We have been out here for nearly two years, going from mining-camp to mining-camp, getting into trouble and fighting red-skins."

"That is all there is to my life thus far, sir."

* Sherman Canfield, of Omaha, is a Nebraska boy who has made a name for himself. His present home is in Omaha, but he is now, and has been for years, the private secretary of Colonel W. F. Cody—Buffalo Bill, who, knowing him for years as boy and man, appreciates his worth.—THE AUTHOR.

The sergeant smiled in spite of his suffering, and replied:

"All! but what an all it is, what a lifetime you have passed through already! But, now, to my story, for I feel that I am growing weaker."

"Yes, sir. I only wish I could help you."

"My name is Frank Fessenden, I am orderly sergeant of F Troop of cavalry, stationed at Fort Rattle, some forty miles from here."

"I came West as a gold-hunter, failed to find gold and enlisted in the army."

"One month after on an Indian trail, I was scouting alone and struck it rich, finding gold; but I kept my secret, and being a good frontiersman, would obtain leave for a couple of days, and go and work my mine."

"Thus I laid up a pretty little fortune, with plenty more gold to find near by when I had time to work for it after my term of enlistment ran out."

"I at last decided to take that man as my comrade, for he saved my life at the risk of his own."

"He was a scout at the fort, but Buffalo Bill dismissed him and warned me against him."

"I have heard of Buffalo Bill."

"Yes, he is a splendid fellow, the chief of scouts at Fort Rattle, and the king of all bordermen."

"Believing I could trust the man, Brad Dixon, I took him to my mine and set him to work."

"When I went there this morning he had done but little, and, determined to have all, he fired upon me, giving me my death wound."

"You have avenged me, and it will be for you, my brave youth, to hear my dying words, and to fulfill the last wishes of a dying man, for I feel that you will do so."

"I will do all in my power, sir."

"I know that, and I would trust your face, even did I not meet you under the circumstances I now do."

"Though a soldier in the ranks I am a man of education, and was once rich."

"I married the one woman of my love, and she and our little daughter, Leilah, are now in a little village in Maryland, where my wife owns her little home and is teaching school, hoping for me to one day return to them, a rich man."

"Alas! it cannot be, for my destiny ends here, and to you I bequeath the duty of letting those I love know how I died, and that though I could not come back to them with my riches, they shall at least receive the fortune I have found in these wilds, and which has cost me my life at the hands of one whom I trusted."

CHAPTER IV.

A BOY'S VOW.

THE voice of the sergeant quivered as he spoke of his wife and child, but he quickly controlled his emotion and resumed:

"I would, as it was ordained for me to die out here, that I could have fallen in battle; but, as it is, I must accept the situation without a murmur."

"Do you know where Fort Rattle is, my lad?"

"No, sir, but I know about the direction to take and can find it."

"It was there I was going for help for my pards."

"Well, my horse will guide you there, once you start him upon the trail, crossing the stream at the ford above, a quarter of a mile from here."

"It is about fifty miles, but Rex has often traveled the trail, night and day, and his good sense will tell him you wish to go to the fort."

"The mine is a dozen miles from here, in a canyon in yonder mountains. Do you see yonder peaks?"

"Yes, sir."

"The canyon is at its base; but you will find a map in my pocket of just how to reach there, and full instructions, while the gold I laid away, and which Brad Dixon wished to find, I have described on the map just how to get possession of."

"To you, my noble friend, I leave a half share in my mine, and in the gold I have already hidden away."

"Oh, no, sir! I would not think of such a thing as taking it."

"If you refuse, I shall die, feeling that I have done a great wrong."

"By your own confession, you came here as a gold-hunter, and have been unsuccessful."

"You have thrown two years of your life away, and now have risked yourself to save me."

"You have avenged me, by killing that man, and I depend upon you alone to give my heritage to my wife and child. But you must accept your share, for through you they get or lose all."

"Do not hesitate, for every word I speak is an effort, and I must hasten on to tell you more."

"Will you accept the charge, my dying legacy?"

One glance into the earnest, white face and Sherman Canfield felt that it was dangerous to delay, so said:

"I will do as you wish, sir, but I have no right to your gold."

"You have, for you have saved it all from that traitor for those I love."

"My name and the address of my wife you will find with the map of how to get to the mine, and as soon as you reach Fort Rattle, I wish you to write to Mrs. Fessenden, telling her of my sad fate, and that my legacy to her you will see that she and my daughter, Leilah, get their share of."

"Say that you are to be the miner to work for the gold, and share alike with them."

"I wish you to write, now, for I have paper and a stylographic pen with me, just as I dictate and I will force myself to have strength to sign it."

The youth took, at the sergeant's direction, paper and pen from his pocket, and wrote as he dictated, which was, in effect, that he left to him, Sherman Canfield, the boy miner, a half share in the gold mine he owned, and that he, the youth, was to be his executor, carrying out his wishes in full.

With a great effort the sergeant roused himself to sign the paper, yet did so in a firm hand at last.

Then he fell back and Sherman Canfield felt that he would never rally.

He bathed his face and forced some water into his mouth, to at least see him open his eyes and smile faintly.

"It was, I feared, all over; but I signed it," he said in a whisper.

"You are better now, sir."

"Yes, but I cannot last much longer."

"I wish you to go to Colonel Carr at the fort, and tell him just how I died. Tell Buffalo Bill also, for he has been a true friend of mine, and you will find him just the one to befriend you, and out here you will need his aid."

"To Buffalo Bill tell my secret of the mine, but to no one else."

"When you have taken a relief party to your comrades, ask Buffalo Bill to go with you to my mine, showing him the map, and he will readily find it."

"If you feel that you can trust your comrades, hire them to work the mine with you, but be sure that you get no one who will be the traitor that Brad Dixon was."

"My belongings send to my wife, along with the gold which is her share, which you can express through by the Overland coach that leaves Fort Rattle every two weeks."

"Now, my young friend, you know all, and just what I wish, and I feel that you will do your duty by a dying man and those he loves, and who depend upon you."

"If I fail to do my duty by you, sir, and those dear to you, may nothing but ill-fortune and sorrow dog me through life—yes, I solemnly vow by all I hold sacred to be true to you, to yours and your trust in me. So help me Heaven!" and Sherman Canfield clasped the sergeant's hand firmly, while he raised his own upward in token of his vow.

When he looked again into the sergeant's face there was a smile there—a smile stamped with the seal of death!

CHAPTER V.

HELD UP!

IT was a most trying situation for Sherman Canfield, a youth of sixteen, alone there in the presence of death, and with night gathering about him and fifty miles to the

nearest human being or habitation as far as he knew.

He bent his head in reverence as he saw that the sergeant was dead, and his eyes were dimmed with tears.

Then he took his knife and cut a lock of hair from the temple, and folded it away in the paper he had written for the soldier-miner to sign.

"They will be glad to get it," he muttered.

Gently he folded the hands over the broad breast, after he had taken from the pockets the leather wallet containing the map and some private papers, along with his purse, watch and chain and seal-ring.

Wrapping the body in a blanket, taken from his own pack, he was going to catch the sergeant's horse, when he glanced down at the dead form of the man he had killed.

He passed on, halted, hesitated, and then turning back, as his better nature triumphed, bent over and clasped the hands across the breast, and taking his other much-worn blanket wrapped the body in it, muttering to himself:

"He is dead and I must treat him with the reverence that death demands."

Then he caught the sergeant's horse without difficulty, unsaddled him, and staked him out to feed near by.

Going after the horse of the other, he soon had him secure and also staked him out.

The haversack of provisions hanging to the sergeant's saddle Sherman Canfield was delighted to get, for his own food was running very low, and he had been on short rations since he had started for help.

Spreading the sergeant's blankets for a bed, he then built a fire and ate his supper, just as darkness came on, casting gloomy shadows all about him.

Having finished the meal, he sought a spot near for the sergeant's last resting-place, and was glad to find that the soldier had a small pick tied to his saddle, for he was constantly prospecting when on his lonely rides.

It took him some time to dig the two graves, and he put them wide apart and it was after midnight when, very tired from his hard work, he turned into his blankets and sunk to sleep.

The sun, piercing the foliage, shone into his face in the morning and awoke him.

At first it seemed hard to collect his ideas, but the saddles near him, the horses and the graves recalled the scenes of the day and night before, and he sprang to his feet.

The sergeant's watch told him that it was eight o'clock, so he hastily had breakfast, a cup of coffee from the little pot tasting deliciously to him, as did also the broiled bacon, roast potatoes and crackers.

Having gathered his traps together and saddled his horses, he was prepared to start on his way when he turned, took a few leaves from the tree over the sergeant's grave, and taking up the long stirrups to suit his reach, he mounted and rode away from the scene, his left side feeling a little sore from the scraping of the bullet along it.

He remembered the sergeant's directions, so rode up to the ford, the other horse in lead, and crossing, allowed Rex, as the animal had been called, to take his way.

The horse at once set off upon a trail up the stream, going along in a way that showed he was not at fault, and Sherman Canfield felt that he was all right now to find Fort Rattle, and would soon get relief for his fellow gold-hunters, who were depending upon him to save them from death.

He knew, as he had said, the direction in which Fort Rattle lay from his camp, where he had left his comrades, some of them wounded, several ill and all of them in distress, but the Indians had driven him off the trail he had set out upon, and killing his pony, he had then to depend wholly upon his power of endurance on foot.

He did not intend to go up into the mountain range, or to cross it, but to follow along among the foot-hills until he could see the fort, which, he had been told by one of his companions who knew, was situated upon a high hill overhanging a large stream upon two sides, it being upon a peninsula of land formed by the rivers, and could be seen for many miles around.

Sherman Canfield was therefore glad to see that Rex was going just as he would have gone if alone, and he felt no doubt but that

the faithful animal would take him to the fort by night, or soon after dark.

He was congratulating himself upon having met the sergeant, of the chance to ride instead of walk, to send to his comrades before long a relief party, and to meet the great scout Buffalo Bill, of whom he had heard so many stories told around the campfires, when Rex suddenly pricked up his ears, as he was passing through a canyon, and came to a sudden halt as loud and threatening came the stern command:

"Halt thar, and hands up, or die!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE GOLD-HUNTERS.

SHERMAN CANFIELD, as has been said, was but a boy in years, having not yet reached his seventeenth birthday; but he had been reared amid scenes that made men of boys, and from his earliest days had been accustomed to live in an atmosphere where a man's life was held cheap.

With a pleasant home and kindred, he had grown up amid refined surroundings, and at school had been a hard student, and held an ambition to make something of himself in the world.

It was with a desire to look after himself, to go out upon the world as his own master and by his own exertions to make a fortune, that he had left school at fifteen with a fairly-good education, and, with a comrade of his own age, joined a band of gold-hunters going to the far frontier.

There were some objections offered to the boys' going along, on account of their years, and the party had started out without them, though regretting that they had to leave them behind.

But Sherman Canfield and Nick Buckley were not of the kind to be thwarted, and quickly made up their minds not to get left.

So they bade the party of gold-hunters good-by, and then followed after them by the next stage.

When they arrived at the stage station where the party was to fit out with horses, tools and provisions, the two boys kept hidden until they started upon the trail.

Then they appeared, purchased ponies and an outfit with the money they had saved up, and took the trail of the gold-hunters just six hours behind them.

They camped the first night alone, and the next day pushed on to overtake them, which they did late in the afternoon, to the great astonishment of the band of thirteen men.

"Say you are glad we have come, for you were just thirteen and that is an unlucky number," said Sherman, as the men stood regarding them.

"Well, Sherman, I guess you and Nick will have to go with us, for you certainly deserve to do so, after the way you have tracked us," said the captain of the gold-hunters.

The boys gave a cheer of delight, and were at once enrolled as gold-hunters.

The mountains were reached at last, and the party set to work on the hunt for the yellow metal.

But ill-fortune dogged them. Their captain was killed in a fight in a mining-camp, and in seeking another scene, with the little they had found to reward them, they were held up by road-agents, and, showing fight, several of their number were ruthlessly shot down, Sherman Canfield's pard, Nick, being fatally wounded.

With his hand clasped in that of his boy pard, Nick Buckley had died, his last words being uttered in a low tone:

"Some day you will avenge me, Sherman."

They buried poor Nick and the others where they had fallen, and, robbed of their all by the road-agents, they were compelled to press on on foot, for their horses and provisions had been also taken.

After untold hardships they reached another mining-camp, and here worked hard for half a year, making only enough to get horses and another outfit for themselves with which to seek a better paying lead.

Thus it continued, ill-luck still dogging them, until at last the eight who remained decided to return to their homes—all but one.

That one was Sherman Canfield.

He would not give up, would not confess himself beaten, and decided to go back to the stage line with the party and there make a fresh start alone.

It was on their way to the Overland Trail that they got into a brush with a small band of Indians, and two more of their number were killed.

They pushed on, however, until compelled to seek a camping-place on account of the wounded, and then it was that Sherman Canfield, the boy miner, showed his nerve by volunteering to go alone for help to Fort Rattle, which one of the wounded men, who could not go himself, told him how to find.

He set out upon his pony and with his outfit, and the next evening as he was looking for a camp he ran upon a band of Indians.

He fired upon them as they did at him, and wheeled in flight.

But, his pony had been wounded and after running a couple of miles staggered and fell.

The brave boy hastily secured his outfit and darted away in the darkness, thus eluding his pursuers who were not far behind him.

All through the night, with short halts only for rest, he pushed on, and when the dawn came found that he had thrown his foes completely off his track.

Still keeping the direction of Fort Rattle in his mind, he held on steadily, camped at dark, and the next day felt that he would yet reach the goal when suddenly he came upon the dying sergeant.

But, though mounted when again pressing on toward the fort, the dangers of the gallant youth were not over, as he discovered when held up in the canyon by unknown foes.

CHAPTER VII.

THE PROOF.

WITH the frontier experience he had, Sherman Canfield was too wise not to obey the stern command to hold up his hands or die.

His horse had come to a halt, and he quickly raised his hands above his head, gazing with anxious curiosity among the foliage in the canyon to see who it was that had held him up in the border style.

He did not have to wait long, for out of the thicket strode half a dozen men, all with revolvers in hand.

Glancing quickly over his shoulder, he saw that there were as many more behind him, and an escape there was not to be thought of.

A look at the men was sufficient to show that they were a hard-looking lot.

They were roughly attired, some as miners, others as cowboys, and one or two wore an old uniform.

All were armed with rifles and a belt containing a pair of revolvers and a knife.

They had spurs on their top-boots, and though no horses were visible, Sherman Canfield felt sure that they were mounted.

His first thought was that they were road-agents, and he looked them over keenly, so to recognize some old foe.

But, whatever his thoughts were, he was not left long in doubt as to their intentions toward him, for one who appeared to be the leader, said roughly:

"Well, young man, we've got you in the act, have we?"

"In what act?" was the bold query.

"Horse-stealing, as you know."

"I'm no horse-thief," and Sherman gave a sigh of relief.

"Hain't yer?"

"No."

"What be yer?"

"A miner."

"Whar from?"

"The lower mines along the range."

"Where did you just come from?"

"My camp."

"Who's with yer?"

"No one."

"Are you camping alone?"

"My comrades, five in number, are back in camp a hundred and more miles from here."

"We ran upon some red-skins, and had to camp while I came on for help."

"Where is yer goin'?"

"To Fort Rattle."

"Yer'll never see it."

"Why not?"

"I says so."

"That does not make it so."

"It does."

"I don't see it."

"You'll feel it then, for my word goes."

"Who are you?"

"Cap'n of the Vigilantes of Overland City."

"That is a mining-camp near Fort Rattle, is it not?"

"It be twenty-five miles from ther fort, in ther mountains, and is a mining-camp and general settlement."

"Then what have you to do with me?"

"I told yer."

"Tell me again."

"You is a horse-thief."

"And you are a liar," came the quick response of the indignant youth.

The men laughed, while the captain's face flushed, and he replied angrily:

"I won't git mad with a man whose minutes is numbered."

"I don't care whether you get angry or not, for you accuse me of being a horse-thief, and I say flatly you lie," was the bold remark of Sherman Canfield.

"You hears him, men?"

"We hear," came in a chorus of voices.

"He's young to be in ther horse-stealing biz, but years hain't no sign nowdays of virtue or sin, as I has found out!"

"He's a peert-lookin' young one, too; but, for all that he's a horse-thief, and we has ther evidence ag'in' him," said the captain.

"We has."

"What evidence?"

"That horse."

He pointed at the animal that had belonged to Brad Dixon.

"That horse belonged to a man who sought to kill me."

"Well?"

"I was quicker than he was, and he got killed."

"You killed Brad Dixon?" cried the captain of the Vigilantes, while a murmur of surprise ran among the group.

"Yes, Brad Dixon was his name."

"And you killed him?"

"I was forced to do so, or be killed."

"See here, young feller, every one of us here knowed Brad Dixon well, he were like a brother to us, and he wasn't no man fer a kid ter git away with onless he got it in ther back, and that's jist how it were done—see?"

"I see that you lie just as well about that as you do about my being a horse-thief."

"You is too chipper for one o' your years, and must have yer claws cut."

"What say yer, boys?"

"I guess he'll hev ter hang, Cap, for we has ther evidence o' his horse-stealin', and he just boasted o' havin' kilt our pard, Brad Dixon," said one, and it was evident that Sherman Canfield had no friends in that gang of men, for they all asserted that his own words had convicted him of the killing of their pard, while there was the horse as proof that he had stolen him.

The youth glanced anxiously over the crowd, for it began to look very black for him.

CHAPTER VIII.

SENTENCED TO DIE.

THE whole time that the Vigilantes had been talking to Sherman Canfield, he had been sitting upon the sergeant's horse, holding the other animal by the stake-rope, while upon the saddle were packed his own, the soldier's and Brad Dixon's belongings.

The men who now surrounded him were eleven in number, and their faces showed no mercy for the youth they had contributed themselves the judges of.

Across his saddle was Sherman's rifle, and in his belt were his revolvers; but what could he do against that band of desperate men?

He was anxious, yet full of nerve, for he showed no sign of fear and faced them with undaunted look.

After a consultation with his men apart, while one stood guard over the youth, the Vigilante captain said:

"Jist tell us how yer come ter murder

poor Brad Dixon, and steal his horse, for we don't wish ter be hard on yer?"

"I did not murder your pard or steal his horse."

"How did you git him?"

"I met the man and he would have killed me had I not have shot him."

"You means ter say that yer killed him squar'?"

"Yes, for he fired two shots at me, while I broke his right arm, then brought him down with another shot, and was then compelled to kill him."

"What were Brad doin' all thet time?"

"Trying to kill me."

"Who fired the first shot?"

After a slight hesitation Sherman Canfield answered:

"I did."

"I thought so. You shot him afore he seen you?"

"No, I did not."

"When yer kilt him what did yer do?"

"I buried him and came on toward the fort."

"Whar was this?"

"Back on the trail about thirty miles."

Sherman Canfield had not once spoken of the sergeant, he had not wished to do so, and all the time was fearful it would be noticed that he was mounted upon an army horse and with a military saddle and bridle.

His fears were not unfounded, for the Vigilante leader said:

"Whar did yer git that horse yer is ridin'?"

"I'll tell you how I got him, as I suppose I must do so now, for it was for the owner of this horse that I had to kill your pard."

"How were that?"

"I had lost my pony, shot down by Indians, and was tramping when I came upon a wounded soldier leaning against a tree and dying."

"Dying?"

"Yes, for he is dead."

"Who was he?"

"Sergeant Fessenden of Fort Rattle."

"We knows him, and he did a heap o' scoutin' alone. But, go on."

"He told me that he had been shot in the back by a man who had been a scout at the fort, and whom he believed to be his friend."

"His horse had run away with him, but the man followed him and came up while I was there, and as he tried to kill the sergeant I showed myself and we had it out."

"The sergeant died soon after, and I buried both men and am on my way to the fort to report the affair to Colonel Carr."

"You'll never git thar."

"Why?"

"We is Vigilantes, I told yer."

"What of that?"

"Waal, you is a tenderfoot not to know what Vigilantes be; but I'll tell yer thet it is our place ter run down horse-thieves and desperadoes, and hang 'em up, and you is about as hard a nut as we has had ter crack, notwithstandin' yer is so young."

"Take me on to the fort then and let me tell Colonel Carr my story, or Buffalo Bill."

"You bet we don't take yer nowhar; and, as fer Buffalo Bill, he hain't ther best friend we has."

"I guess he knows you for what you are," was the bold rejoinder.

"See here, none o' yer sarcasm, for prayin' would be more becomin' in yer jist now."

"Do you intend to murder me?"

"We intends ter hang yer as a murderer and horse-thief."

"You have no right to hang me without a trial."

"You has been already tried; but see here, did ther sergeant give yer any mission ter carry out for him?" and the man asked the question eagerly.

"He told me to report his death to Colonel Carr, and to send his watch, ring and purse home to his wife."

"You has got 'em?"

"Yes."

"All right, maybe we'll git some good pickin' off your dead body arter all."

"Come, pard, throw a lariat over him; tie his hands and string him up over yonder limb," and the Vigilante captain pointed to a tree near by with a limb that grew low and branched far out.

Quick as a flash a lasso coiled about Sherman Canfield, pinioning his arms to his side,

while another fell about his neck and he was dragged from the saddle just as a horseman dashed out of the timber, a revolver in each hand.

"Harm that boy and you settle with me!" came the words, while the Vigilantes called out in chorus:

"Buffalo Bill!"

CHAPTER IX.

BUFFALO BILL TO THE RESCUE.

ALMOST like an apparition Buffalo Bill had appeared upon the scene.

He had come through the pine thicket, where the carpet of pine straw had deadened the sound of hoofs, and he had not been seen until he suddenly dashed out before the astonished eyes of the Vigilantes, a revolver in each hand, and a look upon his face as though he had no dread of the numbers against him and defied them all.

There he sat upright and threatening in his saddle, horse and man presenting a splendid picture, one that fascinated young Sherman Canfield, as he stood bound and with the lariat about his neck, and upon whom the eyes of all the Vigilantes were riveted.

The coming of Buffalo Bill had checked the murderers in their intention to string the youth up to the limb.

They stood dismayed by the interruption of their cruel deed.

Each one awaited for their captain to speak.

But he seemed to have lost the power of speech, so Buffalo Bill broke the silence with:

"See here, Dabney Dunn, what does this high-handed outrage mean?"

"We was out on the trail of horse-thieves, Buffalo Bill, and has caught one—and that means we intends to hang him," was the dogged reply.

"Hang that boy?" sneered the scout.

"He's mean enough to steal horses and git away with our pard, Brad Dixon."

"What do you mean?"

"He's kilt Brad Dixon."

"I'll warrant that if he did, he was forced to do so to save himself from being robbed or murdered."

"See here, Buffalo Bill, does you accuse our pard of being a robber and a murderer?"

"I speak of a man as I find him, Dunn, and I kicked Dixon out of my band of scouts because he was a thief and a desperado."

"It is true he was whitewashed by a few in the camp of Overland City, and you became his friend, but that was nothing to his favor or to yours, and I repeat that I believe the youth was justifiable in killing him."

"See here, Chief of Scouts W. F. Cody, you are carrying too high a hand in this country, and you'll have to crawfish, or it will be the worst for you."

"You bet it will," sung out the others in chorus.

Buffalo Bill's response was a mocking laugh, and he continued, after a minute:

"Come, my young friend, give an account of yourself, and also why you have Sergeant Fessenden's horse there?"

He rode up to the youth as he spoke, took the lasso from about his neck, and the other from around his body.

Sherman Canfield gave a sigh of relief, and then said:

"I'll tell you the story, sir, as I told it to these men who claim to be Vigilantes."

"They are, after a fashion, persecuting the innocent very often and taking no heed of the guilty; but the colonel is going to stop their little game."

"And we'll stop yours, Buffalo Bill, for you can't bully us."

The chief of scouts paid no heed to the words, but said:

"Now to your story, my boy."

In a few words Sherman Canfield told the story, as known to the reader, of the misfortunes of the gold-hunters, and how he had started for aid and came across the dying sergeant.

All that the sergeant had told him, save to send his effects home, he kept to himself, and just how the duel had been fought between Brad Dixon and himself.

Buffalo Bill listened with deepest attention, and then said:

"You did good work when you turned

up the toes of Brad Dixon, my boy, and doubtless saved me from killing him."

"It will cast a gloom over all at the fort to learn of poor Sergeant Fessenden's death, for he was a noble fellow, and the colonel will appreciate your defending him when dying from a desperado."

"This trail will take you to the fort, and you can ride the sergeant's horse and take your traps on him, for the horse of Dixon these men will claim, so they can have him."

"You bet we takes him."

"Don't be too sure, Dunn, or I'll leave it for Colonel Carr to decide."

"I was on my way to Overland City, when I saw from the stage that you and your gang were in some deviltry, so I came down to see what it was."

"I'm awful glad you came, sir, for these men would have hanged me."

"They'll have to stop their Vigilante game now, for I have orders from Colonel Carr to put up some placards in Overland City against any more such lawless acts, and stating that he will see to it that crime is properly punished."

"I am on my way there now, and, Dunn, I'll give you one of the placards now, so you will no longer plead ignorance of the colonel's orders," and the scout unrolled a placard and handed it to the Vigilante captain.

CHAPTER X.

THE PLACARD.

ALL the while that Buffalo Bill had been on the scene the Vigilantes were becoming more and more uneasy.

They were measuring their strength against his, not as regards numbers, for they could have overwhelmed him; but dare they attack him was the question which was uppermost in their minds.

They had no doubt if it came to a fight that several of their number must go under, but so would Buffalo Bill.

But that would not be the end of it.

He was chief of scouts at Fort Rattle, he had a large band of splendid scouts, guides and Indian-fighters under his command, and then too he was the idol of the army, and a great favorite with Colonel Carr.

His death would be followed by a revenge that would sweep all lawless characters from that part of the frontier at least.

This the Vigilantes, self-constituted judges and executioners though they were, dare not risk.

So when Buffalo Bill told Sherman Canfield to go on to the fort, while he went to the settlement to place the placards of Colonel Carr, the Vigilante captain said nothing.

The Vigilantes were also not so sure that Buffalo Bill was not accompanied by a number of his scouts, who were within easy call of his voice.

Under such circumstances the scout's fearless game of bluff awed the Vigilantes, while Sherman Canfield looked on in utter amazement.

If he had doubted the stories told of Buffalo Bill around the camp-fires, there was no longer room for doubt in his mind, when he saw him come up and defy a dozen desperate men.

The youth watched Caleb Dunn, when the chief of scouts held the placard out to him, but the Vigilante captain refused it and said:

"I don't take it, Buffalo Bill."

"As you please. I'll read it to you," and he at once began as follows:

"Whereas, there are certain men banded together on this border, under the name of Vigilantes, and in their acts have perpetrated crimes against innocent men, allowing the guilty to escape, I hereby order all such to disband at once, leaving the keeping of law and order and punishment of criminals to the military officers of the United States Government."

"If these so-called Vigilantes do not at once disband, and again attempt to assume the right to hunt down and punish the lawless, they will at once be dealt with as outlaws themselves, as per my instructions from the Secretary of War."

Signed, etc."

The scout paused, after reading the placard, and said:

"Dunn, you and your men have heard what the colonel orders. This is mainly aimed at you, and, as I have read it to you, there is no excuse for your saying you do not know the orders, so I warn you to very quickly obey."

"We'll hold a meeting in Overland City first, Buffalo Bill, and see if the miners and settlers decide that the colonel has a right to issue such orders."

"As you please. Now, my lad, take that trail to the fort and report to Colonel Carr upon your arrival. I will be back there by night and see you."

"Thank you, sir!" and Sherman Canfield at once began his preparations for riding on his way on the sergeant's horse, leaving the animal of Brad Dixon behind him.

"I warn you, Dunn, not to follow that boy," said Buffalo Bill as he watched the youth ride away, and, when he disappeared in the distance, he put spurs to his horse and rode off in the opposite direction.

"Well, I've heard many stories of Buffalo Bill and what he could do; but he certainly is the gamest man I ever saw to tackle alone that gang of cut-throats."

"The sergeant told me I would find him a splendid fellow and he is."

"I owe him my life, for if he had not come up when he did, I'd have been coyote grub now, that is certain."

"I'll never forget him, never, and if I can ever serve him in any way, I will."

"Those fellows, I believe, belonged to the gang of road agents who killed my poor pard Nick Buckley, and yet I am not sure."

"I only wish that I was."

"I am in luck that they did not get the sergeant's papers, watch and other things, as I was fearful that they would."

So mused the brave boy as he rode on his way along the trail.

Coming to a stream Rex plunged boldly in and as he stopped to drink Sherman Canfield saw on the shore ahead several horsemen appear in the trail, and he noticed that they were masked.

Glancing behind him to his alarm he beheld other horsemen, also masked.

"Well, I'm in for it again, and where is Buffalo Bill?" he said anxiously.

CHAPTER XI.

MASKED FOES.

It was with a feeling of deepest misgiving that Sherman Canfield saw danger ahead.

His look behind him showed that he was hemmed in.

There were three men in his front, three behind him and all were masked.

Were they the Vigilantes or not?

He could not tell, for when they had halted they had been on foot, and he now saw that these horsemen wore black gowns to hide their clothing.

The stream was two hundred feet wide, sluggish in its flow, and three feet in average depth.

He was about half-way across, and where a large rock was in the center of the stream, rising some feet above the water.

At once the boy made up his mind to act, and his thought was for the sergeant's wife and child not himself.

He had bundled the sergeant's papers, watch, chain and ring away in a package which he had tied up tightly.

Then he had put his revolvers and knife with it, and around all had tied his rubber coat, making a compact and water-tight bundle.

"The weight of the revolvers will sink it, and I'll chance it right by this rock, anchoring it with the sergeant's sword," he muttered.

So he slipped out the bundle, pulled the sword out of the scabbard, thrust it through a leather thong bound about the package and leaning over pushed the point down into the bottom of the stream.

He then took the butt of his rifle and shoved the sword the full length of the blade to the hilt.

Gazing carefully down into the water he could barely see the object, which looked like a small rock, and the water was not very clear.

He took the position of the rock, with

objects on both shores, and then twisted about in his saddle, as though he was undecided what to do.

He felt confident that the men had not seen him anchor the bundle, and he twisted his horse about as though afraid, which in reality he was.

At last one of the men behind him called out:

"Say, pard, we is tired waiting for you to come ashore, so we'll hurry you with a bullet."

"Never mind, I am coming."

He started to cross as before, but he was hailed again by the men on both shores and told to go back.

"But I'm going to the fort."

"Come back, fer we wants yer."

Sherman hesitated still, when one of the men raised his revolver and a bullet passed unpleasantly near his head.

He at once saw that they were not to be trifled with, so turned and rode back.

"I say, pard, we want you."

"What do you want with me?"

"You'll know later."

"Say, Slayback, you take him with you, soon as we have him foul, and we'll git on and report for safety, see?"

"Yas, I see: but be sure and fix him sartin', for I've a idee he's a young wolf ter handle," said the man called Slayback.

"You bet he be, or his looks belies him," and with this a lariat was thrown over the form of Sherman Canfield, and his arms were secured tightly to his body.

With another lariat he was made fast to his saddle, while he asked:

"What do you intend to do with me?"

"That depends."

"Upon what?"

"Upon what yer knows when yer is questioned."

"But, put a gag in his mouth, pards, ter stop his chin-music now."

The order was obeyed, and poor Sherman found himself more securely bound and gagged.

Then the men held a short conversation together, and while Slayback rode into the stream leading the horse ridden by the youth, and turned up it close to the shore, the others beckoned to those across the river to join them, and the party rode off back on the trail they had come.

In spite of his great danger, Sherman Canfield was delighted to see that his clever ruse to keep the sergeant's valuable package from being discovered, had not been noticed by any of the masked outlaws.

He looked back time and again, as the man Slayback led him on up the stream, the horses keeping nearer the bank they had left, and where the water was shallowest.

But his looks showed that the masked men had not gone out into the stream to see why he had not at once come ashore at their command, and in spite of his gag and the bands which pained him, his breast bounded with triumph at his having outwitted his masked foes.

CHAPTER XII.

BUFFALO BILL SURPRISED.

BUFFALO BILL rode away from the group of Vigilantes, after seeing Sherman Canfield depart, as though he had not the slightest fear of their proving treacherous.

Not that he did not regard them as capable of being, but after he had seen the youth, told him to ride on to the fort, and warned them, he did not think they would dare follow him to carry out their original intention.

He went at a canter along the trail leading to Overland City, distant some twenty miles.

The "city" was a mining-camp in the mountains, combined with a settlement consisting of a dozen ranches in a large valley, and as many as a score of small farms scattered about in the vicinity.

With the ranches, farms and mining-camp the country occupied was quite extensive, while there was a fort in the mountains and corrals, to which all could retreat for safety, but which was unoccupied save when the Indians were on the war-path.

The settlement of Overland City boasted of a few stores, blacksmith shops, a tavern, church and school, and all was under the

protection of Fort Rattle, twenty miles away by the most direct trail.

All told there were perhaps six hundred souls in the settlement, several thousands of heads of cattle, some sheep and hogs, and a number of horses, so that there was plunder and stock enough to continually tempt the Indians, and the road-agents, while the fort had to keep a close watch that the settlers should not be surprised.

That the community was the prey to much lawlessness there was no doubt; and life there was held dirt cheap, while horse-stealing and cattle-thieving, with raids upon the mines by outlaws, was a weekly occurrence.

There were a number of spirits in the camps, men who were more or less idle, who had formed themselves into a band known as the Ranger Regulators, and they had been most energetic in their self-imposed task of punishing those whom they deemed foes to lawless living.

But there were constant complaints from the better element that these Ranger Regulators were no better than the men they hunted down, being gamblers and bad characters generally.

Having heard such complaints made time and again, Colonel Carr put Buffalo Bill upon the tracks of the Ranger Regulators to shadow their deeds, and the result was a report which led the able commandant at Fort Rattle, to decide to break up the band, for though the chief of scouts had not been able to fasten upon them any direct act of crime, he yet had discovered that they were universally feared, looked upon as desperadoes, and had allowed several of their comrades of like ilk to go unpunished, while they had made innocent men suffer.

So it was that the colonel's placard was written, and Buffalo Bill was sent to put copies up at the cross trails, in the settlement, the mining-camp and wherever they would be seen.

He was on this duty when he so opportunely discovered that the Ranger Regulators had a prisoner and were going to cause him to suffer in some way.

Seeing, as he approached, that the prisoner was a youth, he had not counted danger and odds but had dashed upon the scene and by sheer pluck had won the victory.

Keeping at a rapid canter on toward Overland City he halted at a place where two trails crossed and stuck up a placard where it would be readily seen.

Another halt for the same purpose was made at the first mining-camp, and then at the tavern, saloons and stores in Overland City, a great many of the people congratulating him upon his work, when they read what it was, and saying to him:

"We owe this to you, Buffalo Bill."

Having finished his work in the immediate settlement he turned to pass back through the camp and then go to the fort by another trail from the one he had come, when he met the Ranger Regulators face to face, mounted and riding toward their quarters.

He nodded in an indifferent way as he rode by, counted them and said to himself:

"They are all there, so none of them followed the boy. I did not think they would dare do so."

Urging his horse to a canter it was an hour after sunset when he arrived at the fort and going to headquarters to report to Colonel Carr, to his great surprise he learned that Sherman Canfield had not arrived there.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE SCOUT'S RETURN.

FORT RATTLE was a delightful spot for a military post, situated, as has been said, upon a bluff between two rivers, and sloping back to vast acres of meadow-land upon the peninsula where thousands of horses and cattle were allowed to range at will, a line of cowboy cabins and a stockade wall from stream to stream, keeping them in corral, for the banks were too precipitous to cross except near the fort, on either side of which cuts had been made down to fords.

There was a large force there under command of Colonel Carr, a battery of light artillery, a battalion of cavalry and six companies of infantry, with thirty scouts and half as many cowboys to care for the cattle.

In all, Colonel Carr could put four hundred men in the field, and yet have a fair reserve force for the defense of the fort.

The view was fine, the air balmy and pure and in spite of the danger of frontier life, the officers' families found Fort Rattle a most charming spot at which to be stationed.

When Buffalo Bill, upon his return, was admitted to the colonel's quarters, he found that officer enjoying a cigar after supper, and he said quickly:

"I am glad to see you back, Cody, for I was growing anxious about you, and felt that I should have ordered you to take a number of your men with you, as I feared those fellows might get ugly at being deprived of their occupation."

"They said they would call a meeting, sir, and find out what power you had to disband them; but I met them on the way, and as you doubtless heard from my boy pard, caught them in deviltry."

"Heard from your boy pard, Cody?"

"Yes, sir."

"Who is he?"

"The youth I found a prisoner to the Ranger Regulators, who were about to hang him, and sent on here, to report to you, sir."

"I have seen no boy, Cody."

Buffalo Bill's face at once revealed his surprise, and he said:

"Could he have come to the fort, sir, and not report to you?"

"No arrival has been reported to me," and Colonel Carr called for his orderly and sent him at once to the officer of the day to learn if the youth had arrived.

The report quickly came that the youth had not been seen.

"What does this mean, Cody?"

"He might have gone astray from the trail, sir, and gotten lost, though he did not look like a tenderfoot, and I gave him full directions."

"But he has gone astray, beyond doubt."

"Where did you see him?"

"It was in Coyote Canyon, sir."

"And the Ranger Regulators had him in their keeping?"

"They did, sir."

"Then they have done away with him."

"I hardly think so, sir, as he started from the canyon leaving me with them, and I warned them not to harm him, while I read your riot act to them, sir."

"You read it to them?"

"I did, sir."

"Just like you, Cody; but they could not misunderstand that."

"They understood it, sir; but when I came back through Overland City I met the band, and counted them, and they had not had time to get away with the boy."

"Then what has become of him?"

"I wish to believe, sir, that he has been lost."

"Who is he?"

"He gave me his name as Sherman Canfield, and he lives in Omaha."

"He came with a boy pard, along with some gold-hunters who have met only misfortune the two years they have been out here, and the remnant of the band, five in number, are now camped in the mountains a hundred miles from here, waiting for the youth to bring them relief."

"He volunteered to come to Fort Rattle for aid, and his story was told in an honest way that no one could doubt."

Then Buffalo Bill went on with the story as he heard it from the lips of Sherman Canfield, and the colonel seemed greatly shocked at the news of Sergeant Fessenden's death, and said:

"Fessenden was dreaming of a commission, Cody, and I have often wondered why he enlisted as a private soldier, for he was a man of refinement and education, a perfect gentleman in his manners and bearing."

"I am deeply pained to hear of his sad end, but he had a most mysterious way of going off alone on several days' jaunts whenever he could get leave, and I was fearful he would some day meet with his death."

"I will tell you his secret, Colonel Carr, for I know it."

"He was, as you said, a man of education, and a thorough geologist, and his jaunts were in search of gold, he told me."

"Did he find any?"

"That I do not know, sir, but I believe that lost boy knows all."

CHAPTER XIV.

BUFFALO BILL AROUSED.

"Cody, that boy must be found," was Colonel Carr's energetic response to Buffalo Bill's remark that the lost youth knew the sergeant's secret.

"Yes, sir, dead or alive, he must be found, and if he has been killed he must be avenged," was the reply of the chief of scouts in a deep, earnest voice that showed that he was aroused to rescue or avenge.

"He killed the man Dixon in a duel over the sergeant's body, you say?"

"Yes, sir, and then remained by the sergeant until he died, and of course he had the effects of Fessenden, his papers and all else, though he did not say so, I judge for a reason, as he was talking before those Ranger Regulators."

"Did they really intend to hang him?"

"Beyond all doubt, sir."

"For what reason?"

"They accused him of being a horse-thief, as he had Dixon's horse, and then of murdering their comrade."

"Cody, how did the boy get the drop on that desperate fellow Dixon?"

"I only know from what he said, sir, and seeing him you will believe him."

"When the sergeant died he hastened on to the fort?"

"No, sir, for he buried the sergeant, and the body of Dixon as well, he told me, camped for the night, and the next morning let the horse he rode, Fessenden's, show the way to the fort."

"The boy has good stuff in him?"

"He has, indeed, sir."

"Well, what is to be done about him?"

"I will go with a dozen of my men, sir, to the Coyote Canyon and camp until morning, when I will be on the spot to take his trail and see where he went, or if others met him."

"Who else could meet him that would do him harm, Cody?"

"Well, sir, I am always on the watch for road-agents about, and he may have run upon a gang of these."

"Very true—the masked Gold Ghouls, as they are pleased to call themselves, and not without reason, as they are a bad lot of murdering, ghoulish robbers."

"I hope some day we can wipe them out, colonel; but they move in a most mysterious way, and it is harder to trail them and run them down than it is to catch Indians."

"I agree with you; but you will start, then, to-night with your men?"

"Yes, sir, so as to be ready to take the boy's trail at dawn, and now I think of it, sir, as he was riding Sergeant Fessenden's horse, there was no need to leave the trail, as you know I told you he let the animal be his guide?"

"Yes, he is not lost, but some harm has befallen the poor boy."

"I wish you would take some extra couriers along and send me news as you find it to-morrow, Cody."

"I will, sir," and bidding the colonel good night, the chief of scouts went to his own quarters and sent for his band of Indian-fighters to meet him there.

They soon gathered in his cabin, as fine a lot of men as ever were seen in one group, most of them over six feet, with superb physiques, handsome, resolute, fearless faces, and dead-shots, rough riders and splendid lariat-throwers every one of them.

Most of them wore their hair long, and they were dressed in buckskin, even to wearing moccasins, and one and all were armed with the best of weapons.

In a few words Buffalo Bill told them of the reason for his calling them together, described the scene with the Ranger Regulators, made known the death of Sergeant Fessenden, and then the killing of Brad Dixon by the brave youth, a description of whom was given the scouts.

The men who were to go with the chief were selected, and then Buffalo Bill said:

"Jack, I wish you to take these men with you, and a couple of pack-horses, with a sheet of strong canvas."

"Go right through to-night to the foothills of Eagle Peak, and you will at dawn, from what the young fellow told me, pick up his trail."

"Remember there were two horses, one

the sergeant's, Rex, and you can find the graves."

"The sergeant's body you are to bring back in the canvas, so take picks and shovels, and the other grave open to be sure that it is the body of Brad Dixon in it."

"Yes, chief."

"Come back with all haste, and I'll have an ambulance with a coffin meet you in Coyote Canyon to bring the poor sergeant on to the fort."

"Yes, chief, we'll push through hard," replied the scout, and half an hour after the party were on the trail, Buffalo Bill aroused by the disappearance of Sherman Canfield, and vowing vengeance against those who had harmed him.

CHAPTER XV.

THE SEARCH.

WHEN the morning dawned the scouts were encamped in Coyote Canyon, except those who had pushed on to Eagle Peak after the sergeant's body, and daylight found them not very many miles from the scene where the graves were.

With the first hint of dawn the scouts under Buffalo Bill were in the saddle, and, though there had been many horses along the trail since, the track of the sergeant's horse was here and there picked out.

Buffalo Bill had shown where the youth had been, when he lost sight of him, and from there the trail was taken and slowly picked out from the others, until it reached the river.

There they saw other tracks, which had come into the main trail, not very far back, coming down from the mountain range.

There were three horses that made this trail.

Across the stream were seen the tracks of three other horses, which had come up the bank along the river and crossed.

But nowhere could a track of the sergeant's horse be found on the other side.

A most thorough search was made by all the scouts for several hours, but there was not a track seen that belonged to Rex, and some of the men went back several miles on foot toward the fort.

"He came to the river, but never crossed."

"Now to follow these strange tracks which the three across the river joined, and yet only five are visible going back."

"The Ranger Regulators certainly did not go out of the canyon, save on the trail to the settlement. I met them all going into Overland City."

"That means that these six new tracks were not made by the Ranger Regulators, so that lets them out; but, who did make them, and whoever did either killed the boy and threw his body in the river, and his horse, too, or carried him off a prisoner."

"Now, men, all except three of you go on the trail of the six horses, and the others will take the stream for it."

"To-night we will camp here, unless word comes from the fort that the boy has arrived."

The scouts listened with deepest attention to their chief, and those to follow the trail at once started off.

The three others remaining with the chief, at his order rode into the stream, and each one took the water upon each side, up and down the stream.

Their duty was to discover where any trail had left the water on either side, or entered it.

Buffalo Bill took the bank along which Slayback and his young prisoner had gone, and as he rode along against the current, close inshore, his keen eyes searched every foot of the bank for some trace of a trail.

He did not seem to tire, or grow impatient, but held right on slowly, still scanning the shore.

At last he came to where a small inlet flowed into the river, and here he halted.

He regarded the bottom of the little stream closely, and its sides, as though he expected to find some result from his observation.

The rivulet was but a few inches deep, the water ran slowly, and the bottom was sandy.

Up the stream the scout rode a few paces, and then suddenly halted.

His eyes had been rewarded by a sign.

That sign would not have been noticed save by a skilled frontiersman, but to Buffalo Bill it told wonders.

What he saw was where bunches of grass had been cropped off in several places along the banks.

"A horse did that as he went by," muttered the scout, and soon after he came to where there were hoof-tracks in the soft bank.

"Ah! the horse that was being led attempted to get out of the stream here."

"I am on the right track; those hoof-prints tell the story."

He turned in the stream and, riding back to its mouth, hailed his comrade on the other side.

"Come over, Ben, for I have found signs," he called out.

The man went on to where he could cross at the shoals, and soon after joined his chief.

Up the little stream they went for several miles, and then they came to a meadow under a cliff.

In this meadow were two horses staked out.

They had been unsaddled, the saddles and bridles hanging upon a tree near, but their riders were not visible anywhere.

One of the horses was the sergeant's, Rex, the other the animal ridden by the masked guard who had been left in charge of Sherman Canfield—the man Slayback.

But neither Slayback nor his young prisoner were anywhere to be seen.

CHAPTER XVI.

FOILED.

"So far, so good, Ben," said Buffalo Bill, when they had found the horses.

But there was no one in sight, and the keen eyes of the two men could find no track left by those they were anxious to discover.

"Ben."

"Yes, chief."

"I take it that the boy was brought here by his guard, and as the horses are left, it cannot be very far to some camp, or retreat."

"That's so, sir."

"Now, those who have gotten hold of the boy cannot be the Ranger Regulators."

"I don't exactly see how they could be, as you met the gang in Overland City after they had parted from the boy, chief."

"Yes, he went on toward the fort and got caught between two parties of the Masked Gold Ghouls, for who else could it be that captured him?"

"No one else but the Gold Ghouls."

"That is my way of reading the signs, and they sent him on here under the guard of one of their number, while the others followed another trail."

"That's it, Chief Cody."

"Now, we must catch those who come here for these horses, for we cannot follow any foot-trail away from here."

"We can bag 'em when they come."

"Well, Ben, I will go into hiding here to-day, while you return to the ford and wait for the men to come in."

"Let them go into camp there, unless they have made some important discovery, and you and Jack then come back up here."

"Yes, chief."

"Leave your horses half a mile below and come on foot, keeping in hiding until you reach me, for I shall take up a position in yonder clump of rocks, with the half a dozen cedars upon it."

"If they come for the horses while you are gone, I will have something to report, and if not you and Jack can go on duty through the night, in fact must remain here until they do come, or you are sure that they know you are on the watch and have given up the horses, for they may have a hiding-place near and see us."

"Those chances we must run, but you must give them no opportunity to pick you off from an ambush, and you will have to live upon cold food and water for a few days, so bring plenty with you from the camp."

"I will, chief."

"Take my horse back with you, for if I have to ride there are two animals, and when I am relieved by you to-night I will take yours and Jack's horses back with me."

"And when we give up, if they don't come back, we can ride the two horses here, chief?"

"That is just it, Ben."

"Now slip away, and do not return before nightfall."

The scout did slip away from the retreat among the rocks, leaving Buffalo Bill on the watch.

The fact that he might have to face several men did not worry the chief of scouts in the least.

He had a good retreat, had his rifle and belt of arms with him, and was ready for any danger that might come his way.

He spread his blankets in the shelter of the group of cedars, and arranging branches about him, which would hide him and yet give him a view of the horses staked out a couple of hundred yards away from the group of rocks, and the approach of them, and yet completely shelter him from view, he settled down to wait for the rest of the day with all the patience of an Indian.

Meanwhile Scout Ben had gone to where his own and the chief's horses had been left, and mounting had ridden away down the stream.

He led the chief's horse, and returned by the water just as they had come.

Reaching the large stream he held on down its banks, after he left the little creek, and arrived at the camp near the ford where two scouts had been left with the pack-animals, and extra horses, in case of an accident, for Buffalo Bill never went on a trail even for a day without being prepared for a week's stay if necessary.

An hour after the arrival of Ben the two men sent down the river to search the banks returned, stating they had gone as far as they found it possible for any horse to leave the stream by either bank.

The other scouts came in later, and they reported having tracked the five horses to where the trail was lost in the great number of other hoof-tracks going to and from Overland City.

"We have been foiled, Ben, and now it remains to see what luck the chief will have," said Jack, as he prepared to go with Ben to join Buffalo Bill.

CHAPTER XVII.

A MASKED ENEMY.

BUFFALO BILL was not one to fret at delay.

He had schooled himself to wait patiently for anything that was worth waiting for.

There were the two horses staked out, the sergeant's and the one ridden, beyond doubt he believed, by an outlaw.

That Sherman Canfield was a prisoner he was sure.

Taken on foot from where the horses had been left, he would not naturally be far away.

The meadow where the horses were was in the head of a large canyon, surrounded by lofty, bold cliffs that were certainly impossible for a horse to climb.

But a man could scale them, and doubtless that was the way the captor had taken his captive.

If there was a retreat near, it was where the horses could not be taken.

If these Gold Ghouls were mounted then they certainly had a place where they kept their horses.

Having placed his prisoner in safety, the guard would without doubt return to take the horses to their hiding-place.

Thus argued Buffalo Bill, and he would wait for the coming of that man who wanted those horses.

It was late in the afternoon, when the shadows from the cliffs were falling across the meadowland, that he happened to glance upward and beheld a man suddenly come into view.

He appeared upon the cliff, glanced down to where the horses were feeding, and then walked away.

Now and then his head appeared in view, but then disappeared.

"He is coming down into the meadow after the horses."

"I could not see distinctly, but I think he wore a mask."

"Well, I must unmask him, that is all."

So mused the scout, and he at once prepared for the ordeal he felt was before him.

He got his rifle and revolver ready, and waited.

It was more than a half-hour before the man suddenly reappeared in the meadow, coming along the base of the cliffs.

He ran and leaped the little creek, as he approached it, and walked straight toward the horses.

That he wore a mask Buffalo Bill now saw distinctly, and he was armed with a rifle slung at his back and a belt in which revolvers were visible.

He first walked toward the horse of the guard, pulled up the stake rope and led him to the tree where the saddle and bridle hung.

He had just tightened the girth when he heard the words quietly uttered:

"Say, pard, let us get better acquainted."

With an exclamation of alarm, he threw himself into his saddle, and was dashing away, when loud came the command from Buffalo Bill:

"Halt, or I will bring you down!"

His answer was to fire his revolver at the scout, and at once came a reply.

Down went the horse in a heap, the man falling heavily, but quickly dragging himself to the shelter of the animal's body.

He attempted to use his rifle against the scout, now rushing upon him, but the weapon had been broken in his fall, and he dropped it for his revolver, which he quickly drew.

"Surrender, and I will spare you!" shouted Buffalo Bill.

But the response was a shot that clipped the scout's shoulder.

Then Buffalo Bill pulled trigger, striking the horn of the saddle behind which the man was sheltering himself.

He hoped to splinter it, blinding the man so that he could run upon him and capture him alive.

The splinters did fly in his face, but his eyes were uninjured, protected by the mask as they were, and he fired again, this time the bullet whistling by the scout's left ear.

Still anxious to take him alive, Buffalo Bill took big chances, and this time fired to break the pistol arm.

The bullet passed through the flesh, but did not harm the bone, and the outlaw at bay again fired, shouting as he did so:

"I know you, Buffalo Bill, and it is your life or mine!"

"Then your life it is," responded Buffalo Bill, as he still ran upon the man, and halting quickly he took aim and the bullet crashed through the brain of the outlaw.

"Well, he was a dandy to fight," muttered Buffalo Bill, as he walked slowly toward the dead outlaw.

CHAPTER XVIII.

LYING IN WAIT.

THE horse killed by Buffalo Bill had fallen with his head under him, thus, with his saddle and traps on it forming a good breast-work for his rider.

The man had thrown himself at full length behind him, and prepared to fight to the death.

Thus Buffalo Bill had found him, his revolver still clutched in his hand, as he lay upon his face.

The scout turned him over and removed the mask, which the bullet had passed through.

A darkly bronzed, bearded face was revealed, the bullet having entered the forehead.

It was an ugly face, even in death, and the man wore the coarse garb of a mountaineer.

About his waist was a buckskin belt heavy with gold, silver and paper money, and in it also were a couple of watches and some jewelry.

Upon his hat, made into a pin, was a twenty-dollar gold-piece, the emblem of the Gold Ghouls.

"My shot was not amiss, for this shows who and what he was," muttered the scout, and he took the gold-piece pin off of the slouch hat, and put it in the money belt he wore.

"There are my three shots all accounted for, but I am sorry I had to kill him."

"If I could only have taken him alive, I would have been glad indeed."

"Now to leave him until the boys come, but as no one ever will doubtless come for the horses, at least until they come to see

what has become of their pard, I will give Rex some water."

He went up to the sergeant's horse as he spoke and led him to water, staking him out in a fresh feeding-place when he took him back.

The horse proved his appreciation of the kindness by a low neigh, for he had not had any water since staked out by the man who was Sherman Canfield's guard.

Going toward the cliffs from which the man had come, Buffalo Bill sought to find some trail of where he had come down.

But a search of an hour revealed nothing, and as it was becoming too dark to see, he retreated to his place of refuge and awaited the coming of the two men he expected.

They came half an hour after nightfall, and the scout at once told them what had occurred, and went on to say:

"We must fix that dead horse up in a position as though he was only lying down to rest, and stake him out where he was before."

"The sergeant's horse must be put back at dawn where he was just left, and you two boys go into hiding here for a couple or more days, for, when finding their comrade does not return, they may come here to look him up."

"If they do, try and catch one of them at least alive."

"If they do not return, then come on to the fort."

"That man yonder we will take back in the woods and hang to-night."

They were not long in hanging the outlaw's body, and the horse, with the aid of Rex, was dragged to his former place, and with stakes his body and head were arranged as though he was simply lying down, so if any one came to the cliff above, they would appear as though nothing had happened in the meadow.

When all was arranged Buffalo Bill went down to where the scouts had left their horses, Ben accompanying him, and mounting one of the animals he rode away.

It was after midnight when he rode into camp and his men welcomed him gladly, as they always did, for he was their idol, and they heard his story of the fight in the meadow with the Masked Gold Ghoul.

Then they told how they had been foiled in their efforts to make any discovery of importance, while they had lost the trail of the men they had followed.

In the morning there rode into camp the party sent to find the grave of the dead sergeant, and they had the body with them.

They had ridden hard, and had been met at Coyote Canyon by an ambulance, so were to take the body on at once to the fort.

Having left orders with the men who were to still remain in camp, until the return of the two who had been left to watch for the coming of the outlaws to the meadow, Buffalo Bill decided to wait no longer for the rescue of Sherman Canfield, but to at once go with a band of his scouts to the aid of the youth's comrades, whom he hoped to find from what had been told him as to their place of refuge.

CHAPTER XIX.

FOUND.

BUFFALO BILL was most anxious regarding the fate of the brave boy who had so strangely crossed his path, and then so mysteriously disappeared.

He had done all he could to rescue him so far, had made the discovery that it was by the Gold Ghouls that he had been carried off, and, having killed one of them he had left two of his best men on watch for others.

If they made any discovery, either capturing an outlaw sent to look up their slain comrade, or had tracked him to his lair, then the men would know what to do whom he had left in the camp for just such a possibility.

The body of Sergeant Fessenden had been taken on to the fort, under the guard of scouts, and the report made to the chief had exactly carried out the story of Sherman Canfield.

This, and his duel with the outlaw in the meadow, and what were his surmises, the chief of scouts had written to Colonel Carr, stating that he had gone on with eight of his

men to the aid of the youth's comrades, who, from what the boy had said, sadly needed assistance.

The first night's camp Buffalo Bill made where the sergeant and Brad Dixon had been buried; but he was off at dawn on the trail to find the goldhunters in distress.

The youth had told him enough as to where he had left them, that he would not have to follow his trail, if that was possible, so he struck off across the country to reach the locality with all haste.

A well-packed animal had been brought along with food in plenty, and Buffalo Bill led himself, straight as the crow flies, as he was noted for going when not following a trail.

He only moved from his direct course where he had to do so, and the sun was yet an hour high when he came to a halt and remarked to his comrades:

"Here is a trail and it must be theirs, for it is a week old at least, and you see that there is the mark of a *travois*, which must have been made for a wounded man unable to ride."

The scouts dismounted, followed the trail on foot for a mile, examined it closely and they were convinced that they were on the track of the party to be rescued.

There were the tracks of nine horses, or rather ponies, none of them being shod, and the scraping trail of a *travois* fastened to one of them.

The trail led toward a mountain range not far away and seamed with canyons.

At a gallop the chief led his men on, hoping to reach the camp of the party before darkness set in.

They came to a stream which they crossed, then saw that the trail followed along the banks of a tiny creek flowing out of a canyon.

Then Buffalo Bill, at the mouth of the canyon, made another discovery, which was the track of a single horse coming out of it and branching off along the mountain range.

This track seemed fresher than the main trail, and the same hoof-prints were found among those going on up the canyon.

"We are right, for that is the track of the boy's pony, when he came for help for his comrades."

"We will find them up this canyon," said Buffalo Bill.

But as they rode on at a canter they crossed a trail coming from one side where they now saw there was an opening through into another canyon.

This trail was made by a dozen ponies, none of them being shod, and turned on up the canyon.

"That looks like an Indian trail, boys, and we will be apt to find the party besieged, if they have not been wiped out."

"We'll push on rapidly."

And on they went, now at a fast gallop, to, after a ride of a mile further, come in view of a smoke from a camp-fire at the head of a canyon.

The smoke came from a large log that was still burning, for the camp held no living being.

But, dead ones it did hold, for here, scattered about, killed and scalped, were the gold-hunters, and at the approach of the scouts, scores of coyotes dashed yelping away.

"We have found them, comrades," and Buffalo Bill raised his sombrero in the presence of the dead.

CHAPTER XX.

BUFFALO BILL CALLS THE TURN.

"MURDERED by Indians, chief."
"Killed last night doubtless, or yesterday."

"They were outnumbered and over-matched."

"They look as though they had not had overmuch to eat."

"The bullet-marks on the trees and rocks about show that they fought game."

"The red-skins scalped them, took their clothes, weapons, horses and all."

"Will you camp here, chief?"

Such were the expressions that were uttered by the group of scouts, as they sat upon their horses, with uncovered heads, gazing down upon the sad and tragic sight before them.

"Yes, we will camp here to-night."

"Get the bodies together, boys, and wrap them in blankets, so we can bury them."

"We will build a fire for light, as it will soon be dark, and, Luke, you had better go down the canyon several hundred yards and stand guard, though I do not believe the perpetrators of this red deed are anywhere about now."

So said Buffalo Bill, and while two of the men led the horses away to stake out, and another went down the canyon to stand guard, the others built up the fire and began to prepare the dead men for burial.

The chief of scouts looked carefully at each body, before they were wrapped in blankets and bound around with lariats, and then went about in the fading light to see if he could find any traces of the perpetrators of the deed.

The graves were soon dug under the shadow of the cliffs and the five bodies placed in them.

Then the scouts set about getting supper, all of them in a strangely quiet mood.

After supper, two of the men went down to relieve Luke, and to go on duty, sharing the watch between them until midnight, when they would wake two more up and let them stand guard until dawn.

Buffalo Bill retired early, and his men knew by his manner that he was in deep thought regarding the killing of the gold-hunters.

The next morning, when breakfast was over the chief of scouts said:

"See here, boys, I do not believe that this was the work of red-skins, and for several reasons I will tell you later."

"Set to work now all of you, and see what you can make of the signs, and we will leave here after dinner at noon, so you will have plenty of time."

The men did set to work, for they visited the strange trail coming into the canyon and going from it.

They looked all around the camp, and a most thorough search was made of the canyon and for every sign that they could read against the slayers of the gold hunters.

When they all gathered for dinner Buffalo Bill called for their reports and listened attentively to what each one told of what he had discovered.

At last he said:

"Your evidence in every case but carries out my view of the matter."

"Those who did the work came here on unshod Indian ponies, and that would indicate red-skins; but the tribes about here are but poorly armed with rifles, and very few revolvers indeed, and yet we do not find a single arrow wound upon the dead men."

"Also we find no arrows scattered about, and I have looked, as you all have, in vain for moccasin-tracks."

"But the imprints of boots are frequent."

"The wounds received by the men were in each case made with a revolver bullet, for I tested the size with large rifle bullets and they would not enter the wounds, while pistol bullets did."

"I also noticed, although the coyotes had been tugging at the bodies, that three out of the five bodies had powder-burn upon their faces, showing that the shots were made at close quarters."

"They also had half a dozen wounds, any one of which would have killed them, and Indians do not throw ammunition away shooting into dead bodies, but white men do for effect."

"You've called the turn, Chief Cody, for white men, not Injuns, did the work; but they fixed it, by scalping the bodies and in other ways to look that way," said one of the scouts.

"And here is stronger proof still, for I picked up this gold pin last night, and it is the badge worn by the Gold Ghouls," and Buffalo Bill held up one of the twenty-dollar gold-pieces mounted as a pin and added:

"I've got two now."

CHAPTER XXI.

A DEVIOUS TRAIL.

THE more the scouts thought over the matter the more they were convinced that the little band of gold-hunters had been wiped out by white men, not red-skins.

There was in their minds thorough conviction, after hearing their chief's opinion, and then the talk turned upon just who those white men could be.

The gold-pin badge found by Buffalo Bill pointed to the Gold Ghouls being the guilty ones.

But it seemed as though the party who had done the deed had gone there especially for the purpose of killing the gold-hunters.

The Indians, Sherman Canfield had said, had driven the gold-hunters to retreat to the canyon, but had not followed them there for some reason.

When he had left the red-skins had not been in sight, and later he had run upon the same band and they had killed his horse.

But the Indians knew that the gold-hunters had retreated to the mountain range, yet, how the outlaws had found it out was the question.

Buffalo Bill, in talking it over with his men, told just what young Canfield had said in the presence of the Ranger Regulators, so that the scouts might give their opinions, and often he got good ideas from their doing so.

They were not long in giving their opinions, and that of one of them caught the chief's ear at once.

"What did you say, Ernest?"

"Well, sir, I was thinking as the Ranger Regulators heard the boy's story as you did, they must have been as well posted as you were as to where to find them, and in talking it over at Overland City some men, who were perhaps secretly Gold Ghouls and heard them, started off to find the outfit."

"That looks plausible, Ernest, especially as they might have supposed, in spite of Canfield saying they had been unlucky, that the gold-hunters had considerable gold with them."

"That's about it, chief."

"Then we will take this trail and follow it, wherever it leads."

"You are the doctor, sir," said Ernest, with a smile, and half an hour after the scouts were mounted and on the trail out of the canyon.

It departed by a different route from the one it had come in, and there were a number more tracks covering it, for the riders had the gold hunters' horses with them on the retreat.

Buffalo Bill led the way, and once the trail had left the canyon it branched off into the mountains going straight for the Indian country.

This caused the scouts to look at each other, as though they were losing faith in the theory of the chief that it was white men who had done the deed.

But if Buffalo Bill was losing faith in his opinions, he did not reveal it but held straight on upon the trail for mile after mile.

The men were becoming more and more convinced that Indians were in reality the guilty ones, and growing a trifle anxious at their chief pushing so near the village stronghold of the red-skins, when suddenly they saw their leader turn sharply to the right.

He made no comment, but from where he turned off, a hundred feet away could be seen the main Indian trail to the stronghold, lying many rods below the one the scouts followed.

The latter could not be seen from the Indian trail, and it branched off before reaching it.

This would indicate that if Indians were the guilty ones they had, for some reason, avoided the trail to their own village.

On went the chief of scouts as before, the trail leading him now back almost in the direction they had come, yet going obliquely to the left.

A few miles on, the trail and each scout was convinced that their chief, as usual, was right, for they saw that the trail was setting away toward Overland City and not to the Indian camp.

When at last the chief halted for a night camp he simply remarked:

"They played a grand bluff, to go so near the Indian village and then branch off."

"But it did not fool us worth a cent, did it, boys?"

The boys were silent, for it had fooled them, and not their chief.

They were too near the Indian village to

build fires, so camped in the dark and ate a cold supper, while a strong guard was posted for the night.

But no alarm came, and at dawn they were again in the saddle following the same devils trail which was now seemingly leading directly for Overland City.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE RETURN OF THE SCOUTS.

THE trail the scouts followed soon showed them that there was no longer any doubt as to who had made it, when they came to where the party had camped.

"They are two nights and a day ahead of us, boys; but, we know we are right. This is no Indian's camping-place, but a white man's," and Buffalo Bill pointed to signs that his men at once read as an open book, such as the tracks of boots, the building of one large fire instead of several little ones as is the Indian custom, the manner in which the horses had been staked out, and last but not least, a tree where one of the party had cut his initials and the date, as follows:

"H. H., April 1st, 18—."

"We must find out who H. H. is, boys," said Buffalo Bill, "and maybe he will find the truth of the old couplet that

"'Fools' names like their faces
Are always found in public places.'"

"He'll think so if we catch him, chief," said one of the scouts, and soon after the party mounted and rode on.

They came to the Overland City trail toward nightfall, and there the one they followed joined it, the tracks becoming so blended with many others as not to be picked out even by the keen eyes of the scouts.

It was here, too, where the trail of the five horsemen from the river had been lost by the scouts who had been following it, and so Buffalo Bill said:

"The trail at least goes toward Overland City, and there it ends."

"There also are to be found the men who killed those gold-hunters, and not knowing that we have discovered their deed, in time they can be found out."

"If the boy has been rescued, or turns up, he will know the horses of his slain comrades, and from them the murderers can be traced."

"I will ride on into Overland City and try and find out if any party of men have been seen to leave it; or come in during the last few days, save, of course, the Ranger Regulators."

"Had we not better go with you, chief?"

"No, I will go alone."

"Some of 'em may be hot about the colonel's order to the Ranger Regulators to disband, and wish to take their spite out on you."

"I will seek no trouble, boys, but if it comes I must meet it."

"You go to the river and camp to-night, and I will come there, and to-morrow we will push for the fort."

"I hope Ben has brought in some news of that poor young pard of mine," and with a wave of his hand Buffalo Bill continued on the trail to Overland City.

He knew a number of the people there, but was not sure of any real friends, and so he felt that he would have to be cautious about whom he questioned.

That the Gold Ghouls were men from Overland City settlement, he began more and more to believe, and wished to lay his plans to eventually entrap them, but he must under no circumstances allow his suspicions to become known, and he had asked his men not to speak of their going to the rescue of the gold-hunters, and finding them dead.

He wished to tell that story in his own way, and to take notice of its effect.

Arriving in Overland City, he saw that the placards of the colonel had been torn down, but he did not care for that so long as they were known, and thus had answered their purpose.

Riding up to the tavern he saw a crowd there, and one man called out as he saw him: "I s'pose you has come to know who tuk down them papers, Buffalo Bill?"

"Oh no, it is none of my business so long as I put them up and they were read."

"Waal, I made it my business to take 'em down, and I says that whar the army don't perfect us, we has got ter do it ourselves, and we intends ter have ther Ranger Regulators ter do the biz, and don't you forgit it."

"That is your opinion, I suppose?"

"It's more than mine, and you'll find it out too."

"Well, I am not the commandant, so go and tell Colonel Carr not me."

"Oh you'll tell him, and so he knows it that's what I wants."

"See here, you know what that placard read, do you not?"

"I does."

"You intend to disobey it?"

"Yes; I is one of ther Ranger Regulators and, you bet, I'm in it ter stay."

"All right; you and your gang just attempt to run this frontier as you have been doing and you have my word for it that Colonel Carr will treat you just as he would any other outlaws, so take advice and be warned."

"Does yer threaten me, Buffalo Bill?" and the man dropped his hand upon his revolver.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A BULLY PUNISHED.

"SEE here, pard, you seem to be spoiling for a fight."

Buffalo Bill smiled as he uttered the words. His face showed no anger, no excitement.

He had ridden up to the tavern where a crowd had gathered, and he had not dismounted.

Many had nodded to him pleasantly, and some looked a trifle anxious when the man addressed him and began to speak about his intention to remain a Ranger Regulator in spite of the colonel's order disbanding them.

The scout's coolness all admired, but those who knew him best looked upon it as dangerous.

When the man dropped his hand upon his revolver and half drew it from his belt, those on each side of him gave him a wide berth.

To their great surprise Buffalo Bill did not draw his weapon; on the contrary smiled.

Then he made the remark about the fellow's spoiling for a fight.

Quickly came the words:

"Yas, when my rights is put down by soldiers I is spoilin' for a fight, and I hain't afeerd o' you ef yer do be Buffalo Bill."

This was a direct challenge flung into the face of the scout.

The crowd understood it as such, and they gazed at the man with surprise, for reckless as they knew him to be they did not believe he would dare face Buffalo Bill.

The scout did not accept the challenge, as many expected he would, by attempting to draw his revolver and beginning a duel then and there.

Instead, he said with the utmost calmness and a tone of sadness in his voice:

"See here, pard, life is too short to spend it in quarreling, and more, it is too valuable to be thrown away."

"I do not wish to kill you, I do not intend you shall kill me, so if you have any grievance against Colonel Carr go to the fort and tell him so, convince him that you are not as bad as the criminals that your band of Regulators hunt down."

"Does you call us a lot of criminals?"

"No, I have no real proof that you are, only I know a great many innocent people have suffered at the hands of the Ranger Regulators, a number of guilty ones have escaped, and the colonel has been asked by the best people of the settlement to disband you."

"He has done so, and if you do not obey his orders, he will treat you as outlaws."

"That is all there is in it, pard, so don't let us quarrel."

"Waal, we hain't goin' ter disband ter please him and a few cranks in this settlement, and I warns you thet we means business and ef you don't wish ter tarn up yer toes jist git out o' this community and go a-flyin'; see?"

As he spoke the man, deceived by the quiet manner of Buffalo Bill, which he mistook for fear of him, for he was a well-known character, whom many stood in holy awe of, at once attempted to draw his revolver.

No one saw the scout draw his weapon. His hands had held his bridle-reins, and he did not make a motion toward a revolver in his belt, but yet one hand did hold a weapon, a small derringer which it covered, and before his adversary could draw his pistol from its holster at his waist, there came a loud report followed by a yell of pain.

The large bullet of the little derringer had broken the hand of the Regulator, causing him to howl with anguish.

But in a second of time the derringer had disappeared from the scout's hand, and in its place appeared his revolver, which he had quickly drawn.

Covering the man with it Buffalo Bill cried in a voice not to be mistaken:

"Up with that left hand of yours quick, or my bullet hunts your heart!"

The man, wild with pain, rage and fear, quickly raised his left hand, his right hanging useless and bleeding by his side, while he whined out piteously:

"Don't kill me, Bill, for my hand is up!"

A loud laugh of derision greeted his words, while up behind Buffalo Bill came four of his scouts who, against his orders, in their anxiety for him had followed him into Overland City.

"No need of us, chief, I see."

"Lordy! if it hain't Death Notch Dick you has got corralled," and the scouts laughed as they recognized they lieutenant of the Ranger Regulators, and a man whose boast was that his victims were all remembered by red marks upon his hat, and there were nine of these crimson stains which he had placed there as a record of his deadly deeds.

CHAPTER XXIV.

DEATH NOTCH DICK.

THE arrival of the four scouts caused a quieter feeling in the crowd, for it seemed to indicate that they were there to defend their chief, and others might be near at hand, perhaps a body of soldiers, for it was looked upon as a very reckless thing for Buffalo Bill to have come into Overland City alone, after the feeling many had against him for his putting up of the colonel's placard.

The better men of the crowd were glad to see the scouts come, and they were assured that there would be no further trouble.

The fallen idol of the element who had regarded Death Notch Dick, the lieutenant of the Ranger Regulators, had no sympathy from the crowd in spite of his bullet-shattered hand.

He stood white-faced, suffering and glaring before the chief of scouts, his left hand still elevated.

The crowd had laughed at him to see how quickly, after starting the trouble with Buffalo Bill, he had been humbled.

Not one present was there who did not know that Buffalo Bill had not fired to kill, but to wound, and none knew this better than Death Notch Dick.

That the scout's aim had been so true with a little derringer, not much longer than his finger, was proof of what he was capable of doing with a revolver.

Buffalo Bill was the first to break the silence and he spoke in a kindly tone:

"Come, Pard Dick, lower your hand, for quits, as you wanted to kill me, and I was only a trifle the quickest."

"Ernest, go and hunt up the doctor and bring him with all speed here, while I stop the flow of blood," and Buffalo Bill took his silk scarf from about his neck and approaching Death Notch Dick, drew up the sleeve of his shirt and tied it about the arm to check its bleeding.

"It passed through the back of the hand, shattering the bone of the middle finger, so it is not so bad after all, considering that a derringer bullet made the wound."

"Ah! here comes Doctor Dillon now. Fortunately he was near at hand."

As the scout spoke there dashed up to the spot Scout Ernest accompanied by Doctor Dillon, a young physician who had been an army surgeon, but who had resigned to practice in the settlement, as he felt that it was more profitable than mining or army pay, and he had a sweetheart waiting for him until he could save up money enough to build her a home in the East.

He was a skilled surgeon, and had his surgical and medicine case with him.

"Ah, Bill, this is some of your work is it?"

"Yes, and you have been playing surgeon also?"

"Give the man a stiff drink of whisky, and I'll soon have him all right," and the young doctor set to work in a way that proved his skill.

The shattered bone was taken out, the wound dressed, and the hand placed in a sling, and then Death Notch Dick growled out:

"How much, Doc, does yer charge?"

"Nothing for Buffalo Bill's work, Dick—let it go at that, and I'll nurse it well for you, only you must not pick a quarrel with my friend here, or you'll get the worst of it."

"Bill has two natures, the lamb and the lion, and my advice is not to rub him against the fur."

"Much obleeged, Doc, and I guess I'll take your advice, seein' as I made a fool o' myself and got downed in the bargain," and he held out his left hand to the scout who grasped it warmly, and half an hour after, having had a talk with Doctor Duke Dillon, he mounted his horse and rode away, followed by his scouts, one of whom said:

"You must pardon us, chief, for following you, but we feared trouble."

"That is all right, boys, and I am glad you came."

"And don't trust Death Notch Dick, for he is as treacherous as a snake, and that hand-shake meant that he intended to get square some day."

"Maybe he will," was the quiet reply of Buffalo Bill, and he added:

"We are but human, and a bullet properly aimed will down the best of us."

"But I could find out nothing about any party going into Overland, or leaving it, but Doctor Dillon is going to try and do so for me, and he is true as steel."

It was after nightfall when they rode into the camp on the river, and they found that the two men left at the meadow had just come in, not thinking it worth while to wait any longer, as the wolves were tearing the dead horse to pieces at every chance they got, and none of the comrades of the man who had been slain by Buffalo Bill had come in search of him.

The next morning the scouts broke camp, and pulled out for Fort Rattle.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE YOUNG PRISONER.

THOUGH in very hard luck, as a prisoner to a band of masked men, and being led away, where he did not know, young Sherman Canfield did not lose his wonderful pluck.

He was suffering from his bonds and the gag in his mouth, and he was uncertain of his fate, but he was glad to remember that he had thwarted the men at least from getting hold of the sergeant's map, papers and valuables, and that Buffalo Bill would soon discover that he had not turned up at the fort.

That the great scout would look him up he did not doubt; but when he saw the care taken by his guard to cover up his trail he could not see how it was possible for even Buffalo Bill to track him.

He had escaped the Ranger Regulators, to fall into the hands of a band that must be far worse, for, where the former pretended to be law-abiders, the latter masked their faces and preyed upon their fellow-men.

The man who had him in keeping had stuck well to the river, and then to the bed of the little rivulet, until at last they came in sight of a meadow overhung by a lofty cliff.

Here he seemed to feel that he was safe, or had thrown pursuit wholly off his trail, for he staked his horses out, made Sherman dismount, and then, seeing that the youth was suffering greatly with the gag he removed it from his mouth and gave him a drink of water from his canteen.

Sherman said in his dry way:

"Thank you, sir, for being human."

"I was nearly choked to death."

"Waal, I don't mind yer yellin' here, so I'll give yer a rest on ther gag; but don't

come no monkey work, or I'll make yer swallow it again."

"Just tell me what monkey work is, so I can avoid it."

"You knows well enough."

"You is a prisoner, and I has got ter keep yer hands tied, though I'll loosen ther bonds a leetle and tie 'em in front, as we has climbing to do and plenty of it."

"Where are you taking me?"

"Maybe to your grave," was the significant remark.

"It's the same trail all must travel," came the cool reply.

"Waal, you don't skeer very bad, and I've got a sneakin' notion you is a hard nut ter crack if yer hain't been many years out o' baby clothes."

"Come, we'll push on now, and when we gits whar I'm takin' yer, then yer'll hev more time to rest than you'll want."

"Are you going to walk?"

"You bet."

"Isn't it just as cheap to ride?"

"Ther fare is about ther same," and the man laughed and added:

"You're a good one."

"And if signs don't fail me you're a bad one."

"Come, don't be fresh, or I'll muzzle yer ag'in."

"I'm dumb."

The man laughed and led the way toward the cliff, when Sherman said:

"See here, why not ride?"

He was anxious to leave a trail, but the man answered:

"Horses can't go up whar we does, and so we walks."

"Come here, now."

He led the way up to the cliff, where a rocky shelf was visible some twenty feet above their heads, and upon it grew a small cedar, one limb of which was dead.

The man had brought his lariat along, and skillfully throwing it the noose caught over the bare limb and was drawn taut.

Then up the cliff went the man, climbing the lariat with his hands, and using his feet against the rocks.

Reaching the rocky shelf, he called out:

"I'll make it easier for you, pard."

With this he lowered a large rope he had taken from its hiding-place among the rocks, and on the end of which there was a kind of harness to fasten about the form.

Descending the rope, he fastened the harness about Sherman, and climbing up again, began to haul him up slowly.

"You is a pretty good heft," he said as he drew the youth upon the shelf and took off the harness.

Then he hid the rope away among the rocks, picked up his lariat and told the youth to follow him.

Sherman did so in silence, and they went along the rocky shelf, climbing upward here and there, and at times passing along narrow spaces where only the most perfect nerve would steady a man.

Twice the guide asked the youth whether he got dizzy at great heights, and each time the answer came:

"Don't mind me, but push on, only I wish my arms were free so I could cling to the rocks."

"You bet they won't be, for you don't scare worth a cent, and I'm a trifle skeered o' you if you were free, even if you is a youngster."

CHAPTER XXVI.

A MYSTERIOUS RETREAT.

THE top of the cliff was at last reached, though at a long distance from where the start had been made, and Sherman Canfield saw that they were upon the summit of a heavily-timbered and lofty range.

His captor led the way along the ridge, and the traveling was rough and fatiguing, but the youth followed without a word.

As they approached what appeared to be another cliff, after going several miles along the ridge, Slayback halted and said:

"Now, pard, I is goin' ter blindfold you, and jist let me tell you right here, if you makes a slip, you'll go to Perdition quicker than a stone kin drop there."

"I'm goin' ter lead ther way, and you has got ter foller close behind, but don't make any mistakes, if yer values yer life."

"All right, I can go where you can."
 "But I is not blindfolded."
 "Then you'll have to see for both of us."

The outlaw then took off his own and Sherman's shoes, and next, with a scarf, securely blindfolded the youth, after which he took his hand and led him by what appeared to be a very zig-zag trail.

"Now, be careful, or it's coyote food you'll be," he said in a low tone, and there was something in the man's manner that led Sherman to feel that there was indeed great danger.

He moved ahead slowly and with the greatest caution, keeping his prisoner close behind him and with his hands stretched back and grasping him by each arm.

It seemed a very long trail to the blindfolded boy, and once or twice when they halted he felt with his shoeless feet and discovered that there was a drop-off on either side, and that they seemed to be walking along a very narrow ridge, not more than two feet in width.

At last a sigh of relief broke from the man's lips, and he said:

"Waal, yer made it and yer is game clean through."

"Maybe if yer had seen it yer couldn't hev got through."

"Try me."

"I'm durned ef I do," and the man put his prisoner's and his own shoes on again, and continued on for about half a mile still leading his captive who was yet blindfolded.

At length they began to descend by a steep path, and after going a few hundred yards the guard halted and said:

"I'll take off yer blind now, as yer'll have ter see."

He did so, and for a while Sherman's eyes were dazzled, but then he saw after they became accustomed to the light, and he found they were descending another steep cliff side to a canyon far below, and which was filled with heavy timber.

Several columns of smoke were curling upward from among the timber, rising above the tree tops but then floating off into mist as they struck the upper currents of air.

The youth gazed at the scene with interest, for he felt that the end of their journey was near, that there was a camp in the depths of the canyon.

Down the steep face of the cliff they went, along as dangerous a trail as had been the climb up from the meadow, and at last reached the bottom just where there was a large pool, or small lake, the water seeming very deep and to come from springs, as there was a constant flow from it forming a rivulet that glided down the canyon.

In the midst of the tall and massive trees in the canyon, Sherman Canfield beheld a camp, and about it were half a dozen men.

It was not such a camp as he had expected to find, for there were substantial log houses with rock chimneys, and they had the appearance of having been built for some time.

Down the canyon some distance was a meadow upon which scores of horses were feeding, and Sherman Canfield felt that he had been brought to the retreat of the band of Gold Ghouls, which he had heard so much about through camp-fire tales, and which it was said, no one had been able to find.

He remembered that it was said that the masked Gold Ghouls when pursued, after committing a crime, most mysteriously disappeared and could not be tracked.

He had come there on foot a part of the way, and from what he had passed through he did not wonder that the retreat was never discovered.

There were horses in plenty in the canyon, and this showed that there was some way for them to get to the mysterious retreat when mounted.

There were seven or eight men about the cabins, and upon seeing Slayback approach with a prisoner, they at once hastened to put on their masks, so when the guard arrived with his captive Sherman was not able to see a single face.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE GOLD GHOULS AT HOME.

WITH the worry of his capture, his having to put the sergeant's valuables in the river, and the suspense as to his fate, along with

his ride and climbing, Sherman Canfield could not but feel the hard strain upon his mind and body.

He was glad that he had at least reached the retreat of the outlaws, yet he was confident that from what he knew of the way there the scout would not be able to track him.

That the outlaws had a lair so near the fort and settlement which remained undiscovered, was proof of how well they covered up their tracks, and what a thoroughly secure retreat they had found.

The men whom the youth now met greeted Slayback with a nod and word, and one asked:

"What have you got there, pard?"

"A prisoner for the captain."

"He's a young 'un."

"Yes, and a bad one too, I guess."

"Was he well fixed?"

"I don't know exactly what he's worth; but the lieutenant roped him in and seemed to think he would pan out big, so sent me on to the retreat with him."

"If he don't materialize well it will be the end of him, for you know our motto, pard:

"To enter here
 Is to leave hope behind."

"That's so."

"But that is for the chief to say."

"Is the chief here?"

"No, he left the lair this morning, but will be back to-morrow."

"Then I will have to wait until he comes."

"See here, young fellow, I'll put shackles on you and turn you loose, but to-night you occupies my cabin; but let me tell yer ef yer tries ter escape from this outfit yer signs yer own death-warrant, for nobody that don't belong to this band leaves this retreat, that's dead squar."

"I would not know which way to go if I did get away."

"No, but you'd soon find out, for you hain't no fool."

"Just wait here," and Slayback entered one of the cabins, but soon returned with manacles, which he locked upon the ankles of his young prisoner.

Sherman made no resistance, looking coolly on, and his pluck won the admiration of the outlaws, several of them commenting upon it.

His hands were then untied and he was told to go about at will, so long as he did not leave the immediate vicinity of the cabins.

Night was falling and the outlaws began to cook their supper and the boy watched them with interest, for he was half-starved.

He wondered if he was going to be given a square meal.

When supper was ready he was told to join them, Slayback telling him:

"Pitch in, young feller, for if you is as hungry as I is yer could tackle coyote meat."

Sherman Canfield did "pitch in," and he was surprised at the good supper the outlaws had, of broiled bacon, venison steaks, birds, roasted potatoes ash cake and coffee.

"If you is ter be here long, pard, ther Cap will hev ter git a' extra supply o' grub," said one of the outlaws.

Sherman laughed and replied:

"I was very hungry, for I've been on half rations for over a week, and if those I left don't get help soon they'll starve, for they are in a bad way."

"Who is they?"

"My comrades."

"What is they?"

"They were gold-hunters, but we had only bad luck, so gave up gold-hunting and were on our way home."

"The Indians jumped us, and killed and wounded several, and the others retreated to where they could be safe for awhile, and I came after help, for they are in a bad way, as I said, some of them wounded and rations short."

"Yas, that's bad; but where is they?"

"A long way from here."

By cunning questioning the outlaws learned about where the little party of unlucky gold-hunters were, Sherman not dreaming that they would wish to go after a lot of men who were penniless and half-starved, until one of the men said:

"We has heered gold-hunters play that

game before, that they had met with bad luck and was goin' home."

"They'd even starve themselves ter look bad, tear their clothes and appear like tramps, while they had tucked away among their rags a good fortune in gold-dust."

"I guess it's the same with your outfit, young feller."

"Indeed it is not, for it is just as I said, they are destitute, starving and suffering."

"Thet remains ter be seen, and we'll know when we comes back if you has told the truth."

"Come, pards, we starts on ther trail ter find ther gold-hunters, and goes at once."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A MYSTERIOUS PERSONAGE.

SHERMAN CANFIELD was sorry that he had spoken of his comrades, when he saw that the outlaws intended to go and look them up.

Then he considered that as the Gold Ghouls would find no treasure, their going would help his companions, as they would give them food and help, for certainly they could not do less to men in their situation.

The youth had not been long in the lair of the outlaws before he realized that there was a large band of them.

He had seen Slayback and five others, and there were over a dozen in camp, and as his guard had brought him there on foot the others could not have had time to ride round to the entrance of the retreat where horses could come in.

There must be at least a score of them, he thought.

That they were in earnest in going to find the gold-hunters he soon realized, as within an hour after they had heard his story, a number of them were mounted and prepared to depart.

At last they rode away down the canyon a dozen strong, and Slayback went with them, leaving him in charge of those who remained in the retreat, and one of whom had been told to go the next day and bring the two horses from where they had been left around to the retreat.

Sherman heard Slayback tell him to go through on foot and described just where he would find the animals staked out, and then he would have a long ride of it around.

That night he was restless and slept but little, for he did not know what the outcome of his capture would be, and feared that Buffalo Bill would give up the search for him when it could not be found where he had gone.

The dread came to him also that he might after all be regarded by the scout as an impostor, and, having been saved from the Ranger Regulators, he had run away with all speed.

Then, too, he felt anxious about his comrades, and what the outlaws would do with them, and sleep was driven from him.

He arose at daylight and hobbled out of the cabin.

One of the outlaws was building up a fire, another getting wood, and both quickly drew their masks over their faces at sight of him.

"You is an early riser, boy," said one.

"Yes, when I cannot sleep there is no need of lying in bed."

"Scared, eh?"

"Of what?"

"Our killin' yer."

"Oh, no, I take things as they come, and will not be frightened until there is no hope for me."

"Guess the chief will be here to-day."

"Who is he?"

"Don't know."

"Don't know who your chief is?"

"No."

"That is strange."

"Waal, it's so."

"Where is he?"

"Don't know."

"Don't he stay here?"

"Sometimes."

"But is away now?"

"He be."

"Yet comes to day?"

"We expects him to-day."

"What is his name?"

"Don't know."

"What do you call him?"
 "Chief an' cap'n."
 "Then you do not know him by any name?"
 "I doesn't, and if any of the band do, I don't know it."
 "What kind of looking man is he?"
 "Don't know."
 "You are not blind?"
 "No, I has darned good eyes."
 "And yet cannot tell how your chief looks?"
 "Would you know my face ag'in if yer met me elsewhere?"
 "I haven't seen your face."
 "Jist so. I hasn't seen ther chief's face."
 "Ah! he goes masked, then, like you?"
 "No, not like me."
 "How, then?"
 "He wears a black cap with a tassel on ther end, and it pulls down over his head to his shoulders, with only holes for him to see through."
 "A complete mask?"
 "You bet, and he wears a black gown that covers his clothes, fallin' to ther ground almost, and only his feet is visible."
 "He is ashamed to be seen?"
 "Waal, he don't allow nobody ter see his face or form, and that hain't all."
 "What else?"
 "He rides a horse which has his head and body, yes, and even his legs, hid, too, the black cloth hidin' saddle, bridle and all."
 "I tell yer, boy, he do look awful terrible."
 "Like the black ghost of a horse and man?"
 "Jist that."
 "And keeps himself unknown to his own men?"
 "You bet he does."
 "But you are known to him?"
 "Oh, yes, he's got us down fine, you bet."
 "I should like to see him."
 "Better feel sorry."
 "Why?"
 "It's big chances to nothin' he orders you shot."
 "Why?"
 "It may be his notion."
 "I've done him no harm."
 "That makes no difference."
 "Does he not stay here?"
 "He comes and goes."
 "We don't know when ter expect him until he rides inter ther canyon, only we thinks he'll be erlong now, seein' as the lieutenant who sent you here must have reported, and I guess you was held for some good reason."
 "I hope so, at least; but see there!"
 The man turned his gaze down the canyon and cried quickly:
 "There he comes now!"
 "Who?"
 "The chief."

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE CHIEF OF THE GOLD GHOULS.

SHERMAN CANFIELD'S gaze was turned upon the one whom the outlaw had said was the Gold Ghouls chief, with intense interest.

The man who had been talking to him was preparing breakfast, and the youth was watching him while they talked, with a look that showed his night of sleeplessness had not taken away his appetite.

The other outlaw who had been about had gone off some distance for wood and was returning with a large bundle upon his shoulders.

But Sherman was all eyes now for the coming chief.

He had forgotten the preparation for breakfast in the great interest in the one who held his destiny in his hand.

He saw a horse and man approaching slowly up the canyon.

The man was enveloped from head to foot in a black gown that completely shielded his head, face and form.

Over his horse also was thrown a black blanket, so that it would be impossible to tell even the color of the animal, or get a glimpse of his saddle and bridle.

A closer look at these coverings showed that they were made of the finest rubber.

Certainly the wearer did not intend that either himself or his horse should be known.

The word that the chief was coming was quickly passed along the cabins, and half a dozen men were soon assembled to greet him.

He drew rein near the fire, dismounted, left his horse standing and came toward Sherman.

The boy's eyes were riveted upon him, and he noticed that he was of large size, yet stooped in his walk, and was certainly round-shouldered.

His hands were gloved by the same rubber covering, and the coat he wore fell to his feet, yet revealed small feet and that he wore gold spurs.

The men saluted him promptly, and he asked in a harsh voice pitched upon a high key that made it very unpleasant:

"Where are the rest of my men?"

One of those present at once stepped forward and told that they had gone, upon hearing the boy's story, to find his comrades, expecting to find that they had plenty of gold with them and were only playing poor.

"They'll be disappointed then, for I told the truth about them," bluntly said Sherman Canfield.

"All right, if they have no gold they have no reason for living, so they will be put to death by my men," the chief said in his disagreeable tones.

"Do you mean your men will kill the poor fellows?" indignantly demanded the youth.

"Of course they will, for they must avenge themselves for their long ride and disappointment."

"You are worse than I supposed you were, bad as the stories I have heard told of you," boldly rejoined Sherman Canfield.

The chief regarded him a moment in silence and then said:

"I heard that you were captured and sent here, and that you were one of a band of gold-hunters."

"I fear the last one, if your men do as you say."

"They will, and you may not be the last one long, if you do not talk to please me."

"What do you wish of me?"

"Coming here you killed a Ranger Regulator?"

"You know that?"

"Yes, and you were with the dying soldier, Sergeant Fessenden, when he breathed his last?"

"I was."

"It is rumored that Sergeant Fessenden had struck a rich mine, but kept the secret to himself, and he took Miner Dixon in with him as his pard to work it, and then, for some reason, went to kill Dixon, only was not quick enough and got the death shot himself."

"It is false, for Sergeant Fessenden told me just how it happened, that Dixon sought to kill him, shooting him in the back, and then went after his horse to follow him."

"And the sergeant died before he came up?"

"No, he came up and intended to murder the sergeant, who was helpless, and then I killed the desperado."

"And the sergeant told you his story?"

"He told me to take his personal effects to the fort and send them to his wife."

"Where are they?"

"I dropped them into the river."

"Is this true?" and the chief spoke almost savagely.

"Yes."

"Why did you do that?"

"I was in the middle of the river when your men came up."

"I had the package in my hand and when one of them fired at me I let it go and it sunk."

"Curses on you, boy, do you tell the truth?"

"I do."

"What was in the package?"

"Some papers, a little money, a watch, chain and ring."

"And they were lost?"

"I don't see how you can find them, for the current was strong and the water deep."

"Yes, and by your act you have lost me a fortune."

"Lost you a fortune?" asked Sherman in surprise.

"Yes, for those papers told where that

mine was, where the gold was the sergeant had hidden away, and now I have lost it."

"Too bad," said Sherman Canfield innocently.

"Curse you, I'll make you rue that act boy—by Heaven but I believe you are deceiving me, or if you did lose the package, you know where the sergeant's mine and gold is—I believe that he told you all, and I swear to you that you shall tell me, or I will kill you!"

CHAPTER XXX.

A TERRIBLE THREAT.

SHERMAN CANFIELD felt a thrill run through his heart, at the words of the savage chief, for he had fairly roared out his threat, being worked into a violent passion at what he considered the loss of a fortune.

The men trembled, for they knew their chief and feared him greatly.

They expected to see him spring upon the youth and drive a knife to his heart.

But whatever he may have felt inwardly, Sherman Canfield did not outwardly show it.

His fearless face did not change color, he did not flinch from the masked chief, and he looked squarely into the two holes through which glanced the eyes of the leader of the Gold Ghouls.

He argued quickly that as he was supposed to know the sergeant's secret, to be able to serve as guide to the mine, his life was safe.

And so the men and the chief were astounded to hear him calmly respond to the latter's threat:

"I can die but once, and don't you think for a moment that I am afraid to when my time comes, or you'll fool yourself."

The men gazed at each other in amazement, while one, the man whom Sherman had been talking to when the chief came up, said in a whisper:

"Don't, boy pard, or he'll jump yer."

Sherman's face flushed, for the words seemed uttered in kindness.

He remembered that the man had asked Slayback to put less heavy manacles upon his feet, and he had been the one to show him his bed and make him as comfortable as possible.

He had also helped him most generously at supper the night before, and now was the one to urge him to have a care how he spoke to the dreaded chief.

It was but little to pin hope to, but under the circumstances Sherman felt it, and he said no more.

The chief had turned and paced to and fro several times and then said savagely:

"Gorman, serve my breakfast in my cabin, and afterwards bring that boy there, for I wish to have a talk with him."

"Yes, chief," answered Gorman and Sherman saw that he was the man who had at least not been unkind to him.

The chief wheeled and walked away to a cabin that stood apart from the others, back under the cliff, his horse following, and then Sherman noticed that the animal's hoofs were muffled so as to prevent his leaving a trail.

The chief opened the door with a key he had carried and entered the cabin, the horse taking his stand near by.

Sherman sat down upon a log near the fire, while the men regarded him curiously, one of them breaking the silence that followed the chief's departure with:

"See here, kid, thet tongue o' yours is goin' ter git yer neck in trouble."

"How so?"

"Yer don't know the chief."

"I don't wish to."

"Waal, he's one ter git acquainted, and see if he don't git quite intimate with you afore you die."

"Oh, I suppose he will kill me."

"Yer don't seem ter skeer over it a heap."

"What's the use."

"Does yer know whar ther glitter is?"

"What do you mean?"

"The sergeant's dust."

"If I did I wouldn't tell."

"Does yer think more of another man's gold than yer does of yer life?"

"Maybe I do, maybe I don't."

"Waal, my advice to yer is ter spit out

what yer knows and jine this band, if yer ever want ter see yer home and mother ag'in."

The allusion made Sherman cast a retrospective glance and he was silent.

Then Gorman gave him his breakfast with the remark

"This will brace you, lad."

Sherman went to work with a will at his breakfast, while Gorman went to carry the chief his, for he never unmasked before his men but ate alone in his cabin when he was at the retreat.

When the youth had finished his breakfast Gorman said:

"Come, boy pard, we'll go now."

He called out as he approached the cabin and asked if the chief wished to see the prisoner and received a gruff answer "a the affirmative."

"Say, boy pard, go slow and don't make him mad."

"He won't kill yer as long as he thinks yer knows whar ther sergeant's gold is, and you knows whether ter tell or not, only hold out as long as yer kin."

So whispered Gorman as he led the young prisoner to the chief's cabin.

It was a more comfortable structure than the others, had two shutter windows in it, one on each side of the door, and it was by no means an unpleasant abiding-place.

There was a hammock hung in it instead of a bed, a number of bear and buffalo-skins were upon the floor, Mexican *serapes* were scattered about, and upon brackets on the wall, each side of the door, were rifles and revolvers ready for use.

A table rudely made was in the center of the room, and in an easy-chair of rustic manufacture was seated the chief, who said sternly as Sherman Canfield entered the door:

"Now, boy, tell me where that gold-mine is, or I'll take you to the Indian village and have them burn you alive at the stake."

CHAPTER XXXI.

BUFFALO BILL'S REPORT.

THE return of the two scouts to the camp on the river, without having seen the outlaws, who were expected to look up their lost comrade, was a great disappointment to Buffalo Bill.

He had hoped that they would have some news.

But, as none was to be had, he broke camp to return to the fort, and, after making a full report to Colonel Carr, make a fresh start in search of the lost youth.

So back to the fort they went, and upon their arrival, Buffalo Bill found the colonel anxiously awaiting him.

"Well, Cody, I am glad to see you back; but where is that brave boy?"

"In the hands of the Gold Ghouls, colonel, I am very sorry to say."

"I received your report of your camp and what you were doing, but nothing very late, so tell me what has been done."

"Well, sir, in one sense considerable, in another very little."

"Yes, it was a good thing to get the body of poor Fessenden, and I am glad that you did so."

"We buried him with full honors, but the paymaster has been waiting to write to his wife and send the pay due him, hoping you would come in with the boy, who could give further information."

"I am sorry I did not find him, colonel; but I have by no means given up hope."

"He is a plucky fellow, and well able to look out for chances to escape, and if they have done him no harm I am hoping he may turn up in camp soon."

"I sincerely hope so."

"I intend to go out again, sir, and take my best men, for a thorough search for the retreat of the Gold Ghouls, who certainly are in the mountains beyond Coyote Canyon, for the man who had the youth prisoner went in that direction with him, and the one who came for the horses, also came from there."

"And did not return?" the colonel said significantly, having heard the story of the chief of scouts' adventure from those who had come in with the sergeant's body.

"No, sir, he was buried where he fell; but the leaving of the horses where I found them proves that one cannot ride to the re-

treat that way, and the man who came after them came from over the cliff."

"His idea was to carry the horses around, how far I do not know, but certainly their retreat must be where they can go and come on horseback."

"I should certainly think so, Cody; but you went off on the trail of the boy to the relief of his comrades?"

"Yes, sir, and I have a sad story to tell you of our discovery."

The story was told, of finding the bodies, and how they had been scalped and all indications left to let it be supposed Indians had done the deed.

The colonel's brow darkened as Buffalo Bill went on to give his proofs that white men were the guilty ones, and they could only be the Gold Ghouls, while they had been tracked into Overland City settlement.

"If the boy was here, colonel, he could pick out the ponies belonging to his comrades and we would soon have the men."

"But without him it will be hard to find them, unless Doctor Duke Dillon can find me a clue, and he is trying to look up the case now."

He will find the men if any one there will, but he will have to be careful, as those Gold Ghouls must have spies and secret friends in the settlement."

"There is no doubt of that, colonel; but I have a report to make, sir, and I trust you will not consider me to blame in the matter, though there were witnesses you can get the story from also, sir."

"I believe your words indicate a killing scrape, but I feel that you will tell me the affair as it happened."

"I will, sir; but it is not so bad as a killing scrape."

"No man shuns the taking of human life more than I, sir, but on account of my position as a scout, I am often forced into a difficulty that means my life or that of my foe, and such was the case to-day, sir."

"You have heard of Death Notch Dick, sir?"

"Ah, yes, a desperado, though one of the Ranger Regulators."

"Well, sir, he began to kick against your order to disband the Regulators, got abusive, and though I advised him, for the good of his health, to go slow, he attempted to draw his revolver on me, when, having slipped my derringer from my sleeve into my grip, I sent a bullet through his hand."

"I then ordered him to hold the other up, and Doctor Dillon was sent for and fixed him up all right."

"He shook hands with me when I left, but he'll kill me the first chance he gets, as I well know."

"There is no doubt of that, Cody, for he is a desperate, dangerous and very bad man, and I regret that you were so merciful, and I shall let the matter rest as it is, only be careful to keep your eye on him."

"I will, sir."

"How do the other Regulators take my order to disband?"

"They will obey, sir, and save trouble; but they growl, of course."

"I shall send a troop through the settlement once each week, to show them I am on the watch."

"It will be a good idea, sir, and Doctor Dillon will report anything of importance, as he promised me to do so, and going all around as he does to the mining-camps, ranches, farms and living right in Overland City he has every chance to find out if any thing is going wrong."

"He certainly has, and he is a plucky fellow too, but now to this unfortunate young *protege* of yours, this brave boy Canfield, for we must make a strong effort to rescue him?"

"We must, sir, and I will leave to-night with a dozen of my picked men for that purpose," was Buffalo Bill's reply.

CHAPTER XXXII.

A SCOUT'S FATE.

IT was after nightfall that Buffalo Bill and his scouts started forth upon the second search for Sherman Canfield.

On the first one they had discovered that he had been certainly captured by the Gold Ghouls, and also that his comrades, awaiting for him to bring them aid, had been foully

murdered by men who must also be none other than the masked outlaws.

In starting out this second time Buffalo Bill had taken fourteen men with him.

He had picked his very best trailers, men who could track an Indian, and were rich in devices and the cunning of border warfare.

He had carried a couple of pack-animals well laden with provisions, extra ammunition and all else that he thought might be needed.

He rode at once to the meadow under the cliff and went into camp in the timber not a hundred feet from the grave of the outlaw he had killed.

The horses were staked out, blankets spread and the men turned in for what rest they could get until morning.

But they were up and at work at daylight, all on foot excepting two men left to cook breakfast and take care of the horses and the camp.

They ranged all along the base of the cliff, looking for a place to ascend, but could find no trail when they heard the whistle calling them to breakfast, and the scouts flatly said the cliffs could not be scaled.

"You forget, boy, that the man who had the youth a prisoner left his horses in the meadow and went that way on foot, and the man lying in his grave yonder I first saw up there on the cliff, and he came down here to get the horses when I jumped him," said Buffalo Bill in his quiet way.

"You are right, chief, the cliffs have a trail up them, only we haven't found it, but we'll try again after breakfast," said one of the scouts, and the others were also convinced from what the chief had said that there must be some way of getting up the cliffs, and all said that find it they would, for they would not be outwitted by a gang of cut-throats.

After they had finished their breakfast they all went to the base of the cliffs, and once more began the search for the trail.

The cliff was like a wall, in many places being perpendicular for fifty and a hundred feet upward, and again, where there was a break, a shelf something over twenty feet from the base.

But along the base for the length of the canyon, there was no footing to be found in the massive wall of rock no break lower down than twenty feet.

The scouts returned to their chief in great disappointment.

They found him standing with his lariat in hand and preparing to throw the coil upward.

There was a slight slope in the wall there, and within the reach of a lariat there was a shelf whereon grew a stunted cedar and a few bushes.

The scouts watched their thief closely, for they felt that he, as was his wont, had "struck it rich," as one of the men expressed it.

The throw was made, the lariat caught on one cedar and Buffalo Bill drawing it taut called out:

"Here, Jenks, you are a light fellow in weight, so go up and see if from that shelf a way can be found up to the top of the cliff, for we could not ride around and get there without going many a mile, if even then we could get horses upon the top."

Jenks caught hold of the lariat and quickly went up to the rocky shelf.

It was a minute before he spoke, and all eyes were upon him as he said:

"I think you've hit dead center, chief."

He disappeared from sight back upon the rocks, and was gone so long that at last Buffalo Bill said:

"One of you fellows of lighter weight, go up and see if Jenks has gone to sleep up there."

"In fact it would be better for two of you to be along."

Another of the scouts of lighter weight climbed the lariat, reached the shelf and disappeared.

He was gone but a minute when he darted again into view his face white while he cried:

"Chief Cody, Jenks is dead."

"He has been murdered!"

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A PERILOUS CLIMB.

LARGE man that he was, at the startling report of the second scout who had climbed

the lariat to the shelf, and so quickly brought the tidings of his comrade's fate, Buffalo Bill seized the lasso and ascended rapidly to the rocky shelf.

There stood the man who had said that Jenks was dead, and he was almost unnerved by the shock, brave as he was.

Hardly had the chief gone up when half a dozen lariats were thrown and caught on the cedar, and the scouts at once began to ascend to the side of their leader.

Buffalo Bill had meanwhile followed the scout back from the edge of the shelf.

There was a break in the cliff there, forming something like a cavern, and going back through it for a hundred feet, they came to a well-like opening from there to the cliff above.

But in this space, like as though at the bottom of a large and deep well, lay the form of Jenks, and he was dead.

There was a gash upon his head, and he had evidently been dealt some terrible blow from above.

"He was killed with this rock," and Buffalo Bill picked up a piece of rock, weighing all of ten pounds.

It lay loose on the rock flooring and had certainly fallen from above.

The other scouts now began to gather upon the scene, and one said:

"It broke off and fell upon poor Jenks just as he came in here."

"We must be careful, chief."

"Not from fear of rocks breaking off and falling upon us, but of their being thrown down."

"Stand back under shelter of the arch, men," and the chief spoke in a low, stern tone that showed he was deeply moved.

"You think he was killed then, sir?"

"Yes."

"See this side of the rock."

"It was just picked up from where it was half imbedded in the soil, for you see it is wet."

"That proves it did not break off from the rock above and fall."

There was no denying that Buffalo Bill read the signs aright, and the rock was passed from hand to hand among the scouts.

"Poor Jenks, he never knew what killed him," said Brandon, the lieutenant of the scout band.

"You are wrong, Brandon, for you see the rock struck Jenks almost squarely in the face, crushing in his forehead."

"I see that, chief."

"And you notice that Jenks's revolver is in his hand and cocked, so you may be sure he had some reason for drawing it, and he had doubtless discovered his foe above and intended to kill him, but was given the fatal blow before he could pull trigger."

"Jenks lay on his back, which shows that he was leaning backward and looking upward when struck, for otherwise he would have fallen on his face."

"Some of you boys wrap his body up and leave it on the shelf by the tree, and then we will push on up the side of the cliff, for I am sure that we can reach the top from that starting-point."

The body was wrapped in a blanket and laid near the tree, and Buffalo Bill leading the way began to make the climb.

He soon took his boots off and tying them together slung them over his back, while he called back:

"If any you boys cannot trust your heads, you had better not make the climb, or there will be others to bury."

Several of the scouts were already growing dizzy, and they at once took advantage of the chief's words to return to the tree, and he called to them to go back to camp and take the body of Jenks with them.

There were just eight men who followed their leader up the dizzy climb along the face of the cliff, which rose there to the height of five hundred feet above the meadow land.

Those below, having descended to the meadow, stood watching their daring comrades with awe and admiration, for though men without fear themselves, their natures were so constituted as to cause them to grow dizzy when on lofty places, as is the case of very many people.

The chief at last reached the top and stood gazing down at the others strung out on the cliff.

Not having started just as Slayback and his prisoner had, they had taken a far more perilous way up, one the outlaws would not have risked, and had reached the summit in safety.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

BUFFALO BILL BAFLED.

FEARLESS as they were by nature, the scouts were wondering all the way up if the chief would return by the way he ascended, and there was much foreboding felt among them in case he did so, as to the result.

Calmly stood Buffalo Bill surveying his men, and saying a pleasant word to each one as he gained the summit.

He knew the great danger, and dared not leave the spot until each one had landed in safety.

Far below him he saw the men in the meadow, the body of Jenks lying at their feet, while they looked in horror at the daring climbers.

At last the rear man reached the summit, and but for the quickly extended hand of the chief he would have reeled and fallen backward.

Their comrades in the valley waved their hats but uttered no cheer, for they were too well trained for that.

Then the chief, after a moment spent for the men to regain their breath, led the way over to where they must find the well-like fissure in the mountain at the bottom of which poor Jenks met his death.

They pulled on their boots once more and walked quickly in the direction they expected to find the opening.

The top of the cliff was rugged, uneven, and stretched away in vast expanse toward a distant range of mountains.

It was almost treeless and it would seem that nothing save to commit crime or escape from death would tempt man to go to so drear a spot.

A quarter of a mile from where they reached the summit of the cliff, they came to the fissure in the earth.

It seemed as though the cliff had split in twain back from the canyon for several hundred yards, then closed up again, leaving a tunnel-like passage below, and not fully closing toward the end of the break, and this formed the well-like opening.

Down into the place the scouts gazed, and then began to search around the top.

There were numerous rocks scattered about, and one place from which a piece had been very recently removed, for the resting-place of it was moist still.

"That was where the rock came from that killed Jenks, and now we must find the trail of his murderer," said the chief.

As they looked down they saw there were breaks, or shelves in the wall of rock all the way down, natural, yet about thirty feet apart and arranged with a regularity as though cut there.

As their eyes became accustomed to the dim light below, they saw that from one of the shelves to another, hung a rope.

The upper end was made fast to a rock, and the lower end hung loose upon the shelf below.

"See here, men, that rope tells the story."

"There were ropes hanging from the top down to each shelf, and the man who killed Jenks was watching us, and when he saw me throw the lariat, ran back and made his escape."

"He pulled each rope up after him, but was too hurried to get that one, or missed it for some reason, and had reached the top, gotten that stone, and threw it down upon Jenks when he saw that he was discovered."

"Now let us see where the upper rope was fastened here."

They were not long in making this discovery, as a cedar grew some twenty feet away from the aperture, and the mark of a rope around its base was distinctly visible.

Then, too, there was the line along on the rocky soil where it had passed, and a pad was found which had evidently been put over the edge to prevent its wearing the rope.

"We must find these ropes, men, and the necks for them to encircle," said Buffalo Bill, grimly, and calling for the lariats of the scouts, he soon had them fastened together,

then one end passed around the tree and the other two dropped down to the shelf, where the rope was fastened.

Though there were volunteers for the descent, the chief slung himself over the edge and went down.

He unfastened the end of the rope about the rock, put it about his waist, and climbed up to the top.

"New rope, one inch in size, tied in knots for hand-rests, with here and there a loop for a foot rest."

"It was, of course, bought in Overland City, and it took all of three hundred feet for the use it was put to."

"I must find out who has been purchasing so much rope of late in Overland City."

"Now we'll see what we can find in the way of trails upon this ridge-top."

The men scattered and began to hunt like Indians for a trail.

They stuck to their work untiringly and patiently, never thought of rest or dinner, and did not give up the hunt until nearly sunset, when they all assembled a mile away from the starting point.

They had made no discovery, and Buffalo Bill could only account for the escape of the outlaw, or outlaws, from the ridge, by saying that they had descended from the ridge by the same means they had gotten up, a line of ropes, and had taken them with them.

Where they had gone it was impossible to discover, and the glasses of the scouts revealed only the wildest country beyond the ridge.

The outlaws had used the ridge as a means of escape on foot, if cornered, by means of the ropes, and retreating from there had gone no one knew where.

To go around and follow them would be a long and tedious work, and not knowing where to strike for their retreat in that wild mountain range, all would be guess-work, while it would take a regiment of scouts to hem them in.

"Men, I regret to say that we are baffled, utterly baffled."

"We can return by that hole, with this rope and our lariats descend and soon get to camp."

"Then our plans must be to find out who the Gold Ghouls are, and shadow them down; but now we are wholly baffled," and the scout led the retreat toward the camp.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE OUTLAW'S PLEA.

WHEN the masked and savage chief of the Gold Ghouls made the threat he did to Sherman Canfield, he seemed to feel that he would terrify and frighten the youth into an immediate confession of all he knew of the sergeant's gold-mine.

To the surprise of the chief the youth looked him squarely in the face and replied:

"I have seen Indians, and they are no more cruel than you are."

"Do you defy me?" roared the outlaw.

"I am in your power, and in irons; you are master here, and an outlaw, so I can do nothing."

The masked outlaw chief turned savagely upon the youth, drew his revolver from his belt, cocked it deliberately and pointing it at his heart said sternly:

"Confess all you know about that gold-mine or you have but one minute to live!"

Not a muscle of the boy's face quivered, and he answered fearlessly:

"I know nothing that you can force from me by threats."

An oath broke from the outlaw's lips, and he again walked back and forth across the cabin.

At last he changed his tactics completely. He resumed his seat and said in a kindly tone, pointing to a second chair that was in the cabin:

"Sit down, young man."

Sherman Canfield obeyed in silence.

"See here, it is my profession to get gold."

"How I get it I do not care, and I work for it harder than the most industrious miner works with pick and shovel."

"Mine is brain work, and endurance of body as well, for I am constantly on the go."

"I take my life in my hand in seeking gold, and what I get is from the sweat of

other men's brows, yes, blood-stained often, and more lives are given up in its defense.

"I do not feel just happy over this life, and yet I am not rich enough to give up yet."

"There is a belief in my mind that Sergeant Fessenden was a very rich man."

"Though enlisting as a private soldier, he was a man of superior education, of refinement and a gentleman."

"He was a geologist, and a botanist as well, and he made rocks, soils, trees and flowers the study of his life."

"He found, in his lone ramblings a gold-mine, and he begun to work it at different times alone."

"It was a long time before I suspected what his lone pilgrimages meant, and then I had him shadowed."

"But he was as cunning as an Indian, and too good a plainsman to be caught."

"Two men whom I sent to shadow him lost their lives, and he must have killed them, believing them to be seeking his life."

"One was dressed as a soldier, the other in the disguise of an Indian, and I found their bodies, but what they had about them had not been disturbed, though one had a belt with considerable money in it."

"I never heard that the sergeant ever reported these two deaths at the fort, so he kept his killing them to himself."

"At last the tide came in my favor, for he took in with him on shares, one of my own men."

"It was Brad Dixon, who had been a scout, and afterward joined the Regulators."

"He took him to his mine and set him to work, and Dixon was in my pay."

"Weeks passed and Dixon did not appear to make his report to me."

"Now I know that he is dead, that you killed him."

"He doubtless had played me false, and was perhaps going to kill the sergeant and reap the whole benefit for himself."

"You know just what happened, you know that the sergeant made a confidant of you before he died, and left his papers and all to your keeping."

"You say you have lost them, that you dropped them in the river, and granting that you did I am sure that you know where to find the sergeant's mine."

"Knowing this you could keep it for yourself, if you were not my prisoner."

"But being my prisoner you must buy your freedom, your life."

"Tell me where that mine is, guide me to it, and we will go halves, and you are free to go where you will."

"Now you know just what I wish you to do, and if you do not obey me, then your life shall be the forfeit."

"This I swear to you."

"You needn't swear to it to make me believe you will kill me, for I am sure that you will; but I cannot tell you what I do, not know if it was to save a thousand lives."

"I never was at the mine, and I tell you the papers are at the bottom of the river."

"Do you think you could find the mine, if you tried from the spot where the sergeant was killed?"

"I might."

"Will you go there with me alone and make the attempt?"

Sherman Canfield was like a drowning man, he caught at a straw.

In going alone with the outlaw chief the chances might come for him to make his escape, or even to kill him.

He would compromise to please himself and so replied:

"I will go with you, but I won't say I can find the mine."

"All right, we will go together, but not for several days; yet, as I have other work on hand just now."

"I will return here within a week, and be prepared for the trip, and you go with me," and having called Gorman to take the prisoner in charge, the chief soon after mounted his horse and rode away.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE GOLD GHOUL'S STORY.

WHEN Gorman saw the chief ride away, he seated himself upon a log and said in his quaint way:

"Squat, boy pard."

Sherman sat down quietly, and whittling a stick in silence for awhile Gorman then said:

"Waal, yer hain't dead, I see."

"Not much."

"He threatened to kill yer?"

"Oh yes."

"Pulled his gun on yer, I see, fer I was a-watchin'."

"Yes."

"Yer don't belong to a skeery family, boy pard."

"Well, no, I'm not built that way I am glad to say."

"Did yer tell him?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Well, I don't really know where the mine is, and the papers are at the bottom of the river, with instructions where to find it."

"But the sergeant talked to you a bit afore he died?"

"Yes."

"Maybe you could find it."

"I might."

"Hain't thar no trails?"

"The sergeant, I remember, said that no one could track him to the mine from the fact that he never left a trail."

"That were queer."

"Well, he had some way of covering up his tracks."

"But Brad Dixon knew."

"And he is dead."

"That means he won't tell."

"Yes, but did you know Dixon?"

"I did."

"Who was he?"

"A miner."

"What else?"

"A Ranger Regulator."

"And an outlaw as well?"

"Waal, he had some secret dealin's with ther chief, but he wasn't a reg'lar member o' ther band."

"Why are you a member?"

"Me?"

"Yes."

"Why shouldn't I be?"

"Well, in the first place, you have not the evil manner the others have, and you don't talk like a man who was wicked just because he wanted to be."

The man started at the words, and his eyes peered sharply through the holes in the mask straight into the face of the youth.

Sherman's question seemed to have struck some chord in his heart.

After a few minutes he said abruptly:

"I am not bad because I wish to be, but for the reason that a cruel fate made me so."

His voice had suddenly changed, and he spoke for the first time without using the border dialect.

He looked still squarely at the youth, and after a short silence went on to say:

"Yes, it was my cruel fate that made me what I am to-day, and I can never battle against the Destiny that has marked my life."

"You need not have become an outlaw if you had not wished to be one," boldly said Sherman.

"You think so, eh?"

"Yes."

"Well, you shall hear my story and be the judge."

"Do you know why I have taken a fancy to you?"

"Have you done so?"

"Yes, I have."

"Why?"

"Because you remind me of my younger brother, for I am not an old man— See!"

He took his mask from his face and revealed it to the youth.

Sherman Canfield was surprised to see that he was so young, for he could scarcely be over twenty-three or twenty-four.

He was beardless, save for a mustache, and his dark eyes, white teeth and fine features made his face a handsome one.

He at once resumed his mask, with a quick glance toward the men's cabin to see if his act had been observed.

But no one appeared to have seen it, and he went on to say:

"Yes, you are strangely like my younger brother, Harry, just seventeen years of age when I killed him six years ago—eighteen months my junior."

"When you killed him?"

"Yes, for I did kill him, though not intentionally."

"We loved each other devotedly, but he was my parents' pet, and for some reason I was slighted continually, though I tried to be obedient to them."

"I was sent to college, and it was when I was home on vacation that he came into my room one day and accused me of slandering him to a young girl he was in love with."

"I was not guilty, and denied it, but he grew wild with rage, said that I lied, and in an ungovernable fit of fury said he would kill me, and sprung to the desk in my room where I had a loaded revolver—this is the weapon," and the man took a small revolver from his inner breast-pocket and showed it to Sherman.

"I saw that my life was in danger, and sprung to seize the weapon, and in the struggle for it the revolver was discharged and the bullet pierced the heart of my poor brother."

"I was dismayed, terrified, dazed, and the gallows rose before me, so I made at once my preparations to escape."

"We lived in the country, my parents were away from home for a couple of days, the revolver-shot had not aroused the servants, and hastily packing up a few things, I left the room, locking the door after me, and taking the key."

"I have the key now."

"I had, however, written to my parents the truth, leaving the letter upon my desk, and folded the dead hands of poor Harry upon his breast."

"I mounted my best horse and rode rapidly away and by sunset, was miles from home."

"I caught a train at a small station and going to the nearest city disguised myself, sold my watch, and with money I had, came Westward with all haste."

"I sought the mining country, but an accursed fate still dogged me and made me what I am."

CHAPTER XXXVII.

A FRIEND IN CAMP.

"Did killing your brother by accident drive you to commit crimes in earnest?" asked Sherman Canfield, when the outlaw paused in his story.

"It made me desperate; but I was a fool, as I afterward learned, but not until too late for me to return home."

"It was only a year ago that I took another life, and of a dear friend."

"I was in Overland City, and I had not heard from home since leaving, but I had a constant dread that I would be captured and taken back to be hanged, for I was sure my parents would so wish it."

"I was walking along one moonlight night alone when I met a man who halted, looked at me and cried:

"'I've got you at last!"

"'You are Gorman Field!"

"Quick as a flash I had whipped out my revolver and pulled trigger, for the man was a stranger in the camps, and I was sure that he was a detective on my track."

"He fell, mortally wounded, and then I learned that he was my old chum at college, and who was looking for me."

"He had asked who I was, said he wanted to find me, yet did not explain, and all thought of course that there had been trouble between us and I had been too quick for him."

"He lived but a few minutes, yet long enough to tell me that my brother had been seized with insane fits while I was at college, making attempts for imaginary wrongs upon his mother, father and servants."

"They had hoped my coming home would cure him, but alas, he was seized with a desire to kill me, and the result I have told you."

"After leaving college, as I could nowhere be found, my good chum said that he would find me, and he started on the hunt."

"You know the result."

"Well, I was suspected of a murder and robbery in Overland City, and again I was innocent, but the miners intended to hang me and try me afterward, and I skipped and joined the Gold Ghouls, for I knew the

chief, and I guess I am the only man in the band who does.

"I have told you my story, pard, and that I took to you because you reminded me of my brother Harry, and you'll find I will do all I can to help you, though I tell you frankly, when the chief is sure you won't tell him where to get that gold, he'll kill you as sure as you are sitting here now."

"I do not doubt that, when he is sure I will not tell him."

"Then my advice is for you to tell him and then light out, for your life is worth more than gold, and you've got much to live for, while I have nothing."

"You are wrong there, for what made you a fugitive you were not at heart guilty of, and in killing your friend you were, as you believe, only saving yourself from arrest and carrying back to be hanged."

"Boy pard, you give me the first consolation I have had in six long years," said the outlaw feelingly.

"Then let me give you more."

"Can you?"

"I'll try."

"You are not at heart a bad man, and you have leagued yourself with outlaws because you did not know what else to do to save your life."

"Now have you been very bad since you have been a member of the band?"

"No, for I have escaped having to be, by mere luck however."

"Well, suppose you decide to turn over a new leaf and be pards with me."

"To do what?"

"To get out of this at first, and then help me."

"Can I trust you?"

"With your life," was the earnest response.

"Then let me tell you a secret."

"All right."

"I do not know where the sergeant's mine is, and it is only a chance that I will be able to find out."

"If I find what I hope to when I get out of this, all will be well; but if I do not, then I deem it my duty to look up that mine, for I gave a pledge to the sergeant that I must keep, and thus be true to a dying man and those he loves."

"Now, the mine I have a half share in, if I choose to claim it, and I'll tell you what I'll do."

"Well?"

"You have got full power here, and can go and come as you please?"

"Yes."

"There are some fine horses here, and you, as cook, have the run of the provisions."

"True."

"And the weapons?"

"Yes."

"Now, as you are not at heart an outlaw, and I never intend to be, and if I stay here I will be killed, and you will be guilty of my death, I say that we can skip out together, and well mounted, armed and equipped, we will go in search of the mine, and half of my share I will give to you, and you can get out of this country and go where you may yet be contented, if not happy, and comfortably off as well."

"What do you say?"

"Boy pard, you hold out a big temptation to me, for it will let me save you from death, and that I think more or than the gold I will get, though I believe all is as you say it is."

"I'll tell you that I know this country even better than Buffalo Bill, and that is saying a great deal; but I have hunted it all over for gold, and it was I who told the chief of this retreat, and he came to it last fall with his men, and there are secrets about it that he and I only know."

"I'm your friend, and I'll think over what you say and let you know to-morrow—at any rate, if I do not go, you shall, boy pard."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

CONSIDERING.

SHERMAN CANFIELD could have given a whoop for joy at the words of the outlaw, but he wisely restrained his feelings and simply said:

"All right, pard, I'll expect you to go with me."

"Yes, you wish to snatch a brand from the burning, as it were," answered the Gold Ghoul, and he arose and went back to his cabin to prepare for the noonday meal.

Sherman still remained seated where he left him, for with his feet manacled close together his keepers had no fear of his escape, and even would not have supposed he could do so if free.

"Now is he playing me, or in earnest?"

This question the youth asked himself when left alone.

He thought the matter over carefully, and mused about as follows:

"If he is playing me then I will make a big mistake; but I'll have to pretend to trust him and then fix him at the first break he makes to play me false."

"I don't think he's bad at heart."

"He does not look it or talk it."

"He was kind to me from the first, and I noticed he sat eying me in a strange way when Slayback brought me here."

"He talks like an educated man too, and he unmasked his face for me to look at it."

"If his story is true he certainly has had a big run of bad luck, and I heard one of the men tell him this morning that provisions were getting low, and he would have to send some one to Overland City as he would not dare go himself."

"Now if I get out of this alive I can afford to give half of what the sergeant left me."

"I will go alone to the river and see if the saber still holds the package on the bottom, for if it does not then I have got to look for the mine and find it, for I must keep my pledge to Sergeant Fessenden."

"If I find the package there I will go on to the fort and report to Buffalo Bill and Colonel Carr."

"If I don't find the package, then I will make a secret hunt for the mine, and when I find it will report at the fort, for I have too much pride to go there and say I have lost the package intrusted to me by the dying sergeant."

"I must find that, or the mine and this man, Gorman Field he called himself, will help me if he is true, and if he plays me false, then we must have it out together."

"At any rate if I leave here with his aid, I will supply myself from the camp of the outlaws."

At dinner Sherman was well helped by Gorman, and he listened attentively to men talking over the visit of the chief.

Gorman seemed to lead them on, as for the youth's benefit, and he picked up considerable information.

During the afternoon they had some shooting-matches, and allowed to shoot with them Sherman Canfield proved to be the dearest shot of all and won their admiration.

They talked together again at supper, about the chief, their plans for the future, the hold-ups the band had had, and also spoke of their comrades who had gone to look up the gold-hunters, the comrades of Sherman Canfield, while they ended up by stating that their companion who had gone over the plateau to fetch in the horses of Slayback and the young prisoner would have a hard time of it.

That night Sherman Canfield slept soundly, and the next day he was wondering what his outlaw friend would decide upon.

"Give me another day yet, boy pard," he said late in the afternoon.

"I haven't quite made up my mind yet."

"All right," cheerily said Sherman, and that night as they sat around the camp-fire the men began to wonder why their comrade, sent after the horses, did not come back.

"Two of yer better go over in the morning and hev a look for him," said Gorman, and the next morning a couple of the outlaws made an early start over the plateau.

They were back at noon and with a story to tell that was not very comforting to hear, for they reported that they had gone down the ropes in the chasm, reconnoitered with their glasses from the cedar bush and were sure that scouts were lying in wait in the timber, while coyotes about one of the horses showed that he was dead and propped up, while the other animal was staked out.

Their comrade sent after the horse had gone down the cliff and had been certainly

killed or captured, and this proved that Slayback and his prisoner had been tracked that far at least.

That night the party sent to find the gold-hunters came in, and poor Sherman heard them tell the next morning how they had found the gold-hunters, and made them believe help was at hand until they got into their camp and shot them down.

Then they cursed Sherman Canfield because they had not found any gold; but the ponies and traps of the gold-hunters they had sent into Overland City to sell, two of their comrades taking them, while the rest returned to the retreat, Slayback remarking:

"And we haster lie low, pards, for Buffalo Bill and his scouts is on our trail worse than mad wolves."

CHAPTER XXXIX.

AN ALARM.

STILL in irons, though allowed to hobble about near the cabins, Sherman Canfield heard all that was said by the outlaws.

They spoke unreservedly before him, not appearing to take his escaping into consideration, and, from the past deeds of their chief apparently looking upon him as already to be numbered among the dead.

He heard with horror their story of going to the camp of his comrades the gold-hunters, pretending to be a rescue party, and thus getting a chance to kill them without danger to themselves.

He looked over the men who had been of that party, led by Slayback, and mentally photographed them, for upon their return, having learned that the chief had been there and intended to put the young prisoner to death, they removed their masks, and those who had remained at the retreat did the same, Gorman among them.

A harder lot of villains Sherman Canfield felt that he had never seen congregated together, though he did except Gorman, yet no other.

All the rest he was assured were bred-in-the-bone devils.

The prisoner was deeply pained at the fate of his comrades, and, as he lay upon his blanket that night, the tears would come into his eyes.

That Slayback had said Buffalo Bill and his scouts were on the watch for the outlaws, was a great joy to Sherman, but the cool manner in which they took it, convinced him that the approach to the retreat must be most securely hidden, or guarded, as they appeared to dread not the coming of the scouts, only to go ahead and run upon them.

The youth noticed, however, that the outlaws sent out spies the next day, both down the canyon and over the plateau, and seemed anxious for them to come in with their reports.

Some mention was made of a fear that the chief might attempt to come to the retreat and run upon Buffalo Bill and his men, and all seemed to realize what that would mean, desperate and fearless as they knew their leader to be.

Each day had Gorman put Sherman off with the request for more time to consider, until the young prisoner began to feel doubtful of him.

But Gorman still fed him well, and otherwise looked to his comfort, though at other times he seemed to shun being with him.

Sherman could not escape, that was certain, without his aid, and so was compelled to affect a patience he did not feel.

One afternoon one of the two scouts sent over the plateau came in very hastily and a signal was given calling the men at once to assemble.

As soon as he saw him, and he was about the first who did, Sherman made his way to the general rendezvous, and was there when the others came up in haste.

They took no notice of him and at once heard the story of the scout.

It was in effect that they had gone to the plateau and descended into the well-like chasm, when, reaching the little shelf on the side of the cliff where the cedar grew, to their amazement they had beheld Buffalo Bill and his scouts in the meadow.

The chief of scouts was at the base of the cliff, and his men were coming toward him from different directions.

They counted fifteen including Buffalo Bill, and the latter had said so that they heard him, that he intended to lasso the tree on the rocky shelf and see if they could get up that way.

Then they had fled back through the cave and began to climb the ropes, pulling them up after them, though one they had forgotten.

Looking over, after they had reached the top they saw a scout enter the chasm below, and he spied them and was drawing his revolver, when the narrator, who had seized a heavy stone, threw it down and it crushed the man beneath it.

"Then we ran," he continued, "and taking up a position in a hiding place that gave us a view of the meadow, we saw Buffalo Bill sending his men up the side of the cliff."

"Along our trail?" asked Gorman.

"No, almost straight up, and you bet it was a bold thing to do."

"That Buffalo Bill will do anything," said an outlaw.

"Yes, and if he told his men to come they would follow him to Hades."

"Yes, that's so."

"But did they get up?"

"I at once came here to tell you, pards, while Casey remained to watch them from the Crow's Nest, as we call that big rock."

"If they find our trail he will run for camp and notify us, so we can jist pick them off one by one, and that will end Buffalo Bill and his band."

"Yas, but they won't come, for even they can't track men in stockin' feet, and will never think we crosses the Snake's Back Ridge we does."

"They'll come upon the plateau, and then go back, for they'll never come here," and Gorman's confidence seemed to be shared by all as they talked it over, each one agreeing that if they did come Buffalo Bill and his scouts were doomed.

"There comes Casey now," and at Gorman's word another alarm was felt.

CHAPTER XL.

THE PLEDGE.

CASEY the outlaw came along the canyon at a run.

Had he been seen first upon the cliffs above more anxiety would have been felt, for it would be certain that Buffalo Bill had trailed them and was coming to the lair along the Snake's Backbone, as the long and narrow ridge was called that connected the plateau with the mountains, and where the slightest false step would hurl one to death on the rocks far below on one side or the other.

In fact a glance along the Snake's Back gave the appearance of it's being split in a number of cases, where such was not really the case, as each of these places could be gotten over with caution, though it did not appear so to the beholder.

When Casey arrived he swung his sombrero around his head and cried:

"They've gone back!"

"They came upon the plateau?"

"You bet they did, and looked over every yard of it."

"Buffalo Bill run his glass along the Snake's Back, but seemed to feel nothing but a bird could take that trail, and the whole lot nalted at Blind Canyon, and seemed to feel that was the way we left the plateau, with ropes, for they measured their lariats and found they were not long enough."

"Then, too, they were on the watch and saw that if they did get down we would ambush them, and Buffalo Bill is well aware that our chief can bring over twenty men against him, and even his scouts are not bullet proof."

"So they went back and retreated to the meadow, so will give it up and bury their dead comrade, I guess."

"And they can never track us here around the other way," said Gorman.

"You bet they won't."

"I tell you this is the safest hidin'-place on 'arth," replied another.

Sherman Canfield made no reply, but took in every word that was uttered.

That the movement of the scouts might not be a blind, Casey was ordered to return with half a dozen outlaws, and go prepared to remain on the plateau all night.

At the same time, in case a double move was intended, there were half a dozen more sent down the canyon to join those who had gone that way in the morning, and all were to be prepared for resistance should Buffalo Bill track them to their lair.

Gorman had given the orders dispatching the outlaws as guards, for, in the absence of Brandon, the outlaw lieutenant, the chief always gave him command of the camp, and both their leaders were then away.

With a dozen men off as guards, there were but few left in camp, and that night Gorman gave a sign to move away from the fire where all sat.

This the young prisoner did by going to his blankets for the night.

Gorman soon after counted the men, saw that none were absent of those left in camp, and he slipped away to the cabin.

He sat down in the door where he could see the men and said quietly:

"Gone to sleep, boy pard?"

"No, indeed."

"You heard what the men reported?"

"Yes."

"Well, if Buffalo Bill has set out to find this place, he'll do it."

"It may not be to-morrow, or next day, or next week or month, but in time he'll get here by some means."

"I have heard he is not a man to give up, once he starts on a trail."

"That's it, he never does."

"He is like a bloodhound on a trail when he knows he is right, and he'll get here."

"And that means a hot fight?"

"I don't know, for he'll come when we are off our guard, and it means a rope for most of us."

"Well, you all know that you deserve it," was the not very consoling remark of the young prisoner.

"Yes, I guess they do; but you have set me to thinking, and I've got very fond of you, lad."

"I am determined not to be here when Buffalo Bill comes, and I am going to give you a pledge."

"I am mighty glad of it, Pard Gorman, for I thought you had decided to break your word."

"Oh, no, not that; but I've been thinking, plotting, planning for our good."

"I am going to give you a pledge to stand by you, to join you in the work you said you had to do, but upon conditions."

"Well?"

"They say there is honor among thieves, and I do not wish to have the chief believe I am a traitor to him, that I would set you free, and so I will have you go alone, and I will follow you at a stated time."

"I will give you my pledge to this."

"It's a bargain," was Sherman Canfield's eager response.

CHAPTER XLI.

THE PLOT.

"Now, boy pard, let me tell you what I expect of you," said Gorman.

"Fire away."

"A pledge as solemn as the one I make to you."

"Let me hear it."

"First hear my plot for your escape."

"All right."

"I have picked out for you two of the best horses in the outfit, and a fine saddle and bridle, a lariat that belongs to the chief and a Mexican saddle and bridle that can't be beaten."

"Good!"

"Then too I have selected for you the best rifle, and belt of arms I can find, with ammunition in plenty, along with serapes and all you'll need for a camping outfit."

"I'll be fixed away out of sight."

"I wish you to be."

"The lieutenant stopped over in Overland City with a couple of men to get provisions, for you must know some of our men are regarded as honest miners and go about the settlement unsuspected."

"I ordered a big lot of provisions, and when they come to-morrow, you shall have

a large share put away for you, bacon, coffee, sugar, flour and all else you need."

"You're a dandy, pard."

"I'm hungry at the thought of the good things."

"Now I will have your whole outfit ready for you to-morrow night, for by that time the scare from Buffalo Bill's coming will have blown over, and the chief may be coming soon again."

"I wish to get you away, and I'll take you out of the canyon myself and guide you to a spot from whence I can direct you to where you are to go and wait for me."

"I've got a map here I made, and which you are to keep and study to-morrow."

"I will, but will not my going get you into trouble?"

"No, I will arrange that and I'll tell you how."

"There is one man here whom the chief told me to watch."

"I've done so, and I am sure the first time he gets a chance to go to Overland City he intends to strike for the fort and betray us to Buffalo Bill."

"He dropped a paper the other day and I picked it up and read it."

"It is a map how to come into the canyon, of the situation of the cabins, the chief's quarters, how many men sleep in each and the number in the band."

"With this is a paper with copies of the reward for the chief's head, dead or alive, so much for each Gold Ghoul, and such a sum for the capture of the outfit."

"I put the paper where I found it, and soon after he came along white as a sheet looking for something and picked it up."

"Now I told him to-day I wished him to go to Overland City in a few days, on a special mission for the chief, and he seemed delighted at the chance."

"He is the man who will have to suffer for your escape, and I tell you frankly he is robbing the men secretly and making all preparations for getting us hanged."

"So he'll run his neck in the noose himself."

"Exactly."

"Well, sooner or later I do not suppose will matter much; but can you fasten the suspicion on him?"

"I can and will, and there is no man more deserving of death, for, by his own confession he killed his wife and came West, and he is as merciless as a hyena, while he is now plotting to get his comrades hanged, to get rewards for his treachery and is robbing them beforehand."

"Let him hang," was Sherman's complacent rejoinder.

"Now, to-morrow night, instead of coming to bed, slip down along the cliffs and await for me."

"I'll join you there at the big cedar you have sat under every day."

"I remember."

"I'll unlock your irons and lead you to safety."

"This man, the traitor, will be on duty to-morrow night, for one man has always to remain up, and generally sits by the fire half asleep."

His name is Doyle—the men call him Father Doyle because he shaves clean and looks like a priest."

"I know him."

"I can get back to my blankets unseen, and in the morning will try and keep your escape from being known as long as I can."

"Now you know my plan?"

"Yes, Pard Gorman, and it is a dandy one, though a little rough on Doyle."

"He has himself to blame for it."

"All right, it's his funeral."

"Now, boy pard, for my conditions."

"Well?"

"You said you would hunt the sergeant's mine and—"

"And finding it will give you half my share."

"That is all right; but I wish to say that the chief of this band has twice saved my life."

"He saved me once when the Indians were going to burn me at the stake, and again when the miners were going to hang me."

"He is a bac man, and does a great deal of harm; but I wish to see him come to no trouble through me, or my act."

"I wish you to promise me that you will

not kill him, unless in defense of your own life: that you will not guide Buffalo Bill to catch, or kill him, whatever you may do for the rest of the band, and, if you discover him as he is that you will not betray him.

"Do this and you go free, and within a week I will join you and we will be pardons together."

"Refuse my request regarding the chief, and I will say frankly I will not help you."

"I appreciate your motive, Pard Gorman, and accept your conditions, so give you my pledge," was the earnest response.

"Then it is a compact."

"Now go to sleep and get a good night's rest," and Gorman returned to the group at the fire, leaving Sherman Canfield in a very pleasant frame of mind.

CHAPTER XLII.

THE ESCAPE.

THE next morning Sherman Canfield arose with a deep feeling of anxiety, though he had, young as he was, learned the Indian trait of completely hiding his feelings.

He ate a good breakfast, listened to the talk of the outlaws, and hobbled about near the cabins, going to the large cedar a hundred yards away where he had found comfort in lying upon the straw at the base and thinking.

Then would form itself upon his mind the dread of the chief's coming that day, the fear that the scouts might make an attack, and Buffalo Bill meet with defeat, perhaps death.

Then there loomed up before him the fear that Gorman's plot might fail, until at last he muttered:

"What a fool I am to lie here borrowing trouble when I've got more than I want now."

"I'll not worry, but wait and take, my chances."

Just then he saw Doyle passing down the canyon toward the spring, carrying two buckets.

The man saw him, nodded, went on after the water and leaving it by Gorman's campfire came over and sat down on the cedar straw near him.

"Say, young pard, I guesses you is gettin' pretty tired o' prisoner life," he said.

"You bet I am."

"I believe you knows where Sergeant Fessenden has a mine?"

"They say I do."

"I guesses you does, for you was with him when he croaked, and he didn't go without tellin' you."

"He told me a great deal about his family."

"And his gold too, I'll bet on it."

"Suppose he did?"

"Waal, I'm on ther make I am, and I don't care who dies or lives so I gits gold, and I feels sorry for you and wants ter help yer, so if you will divvy with me I'll git yer out of this and make no mistake."

"How can you do it?"

"Never mind how, but jist write me a leetle paper giving me half an interest in your mine, in case you is set free out of this by me."

"Suppose I have no mine?"

"I'll take chances on that."

"All right, give me a pencil and some paper."

"No, I'll smuggle out here to you pen, ink and paper and you write it."

The man departed but soon returned with paper, ink and a pen, and Sherman wrote as dictated, to give him a "divvy," as the outlaw called it, in the gold-mine he was then the owner of.

Doyle tucked the paper away and returned with the writing materials to the cabin, and the youth smiled grimly at having the man show his hand so quickly and verify the statement of Gorman.

About noon the guards from both on the plateau and down the canyon came in, and they reported that Buffalo Bill had buried the dead scout in the timber where they were encamped and then departed.

There was another grave there which the outlaws had unearthed and in it had found their comrade who had been sent after the two horses left by Slayback in the meadow.

"That evens it up, the killin' of a scout,"

said Slayback, and the outlaws all set it down that their companion killed by Buffalo Bill had been avenged by the death of the scout killed in the chasm with a stone.

"I only wishes we could avenge each one of our pards as easy," said one of the outlaws, and his sentiments were unanimously concurred in, while Casey remarked with a cruel leer at Sherman:

"Waal, when ther chief comes, I guess there'll be another offset for our pards kilt, by hangin' ther youngster."

"You just come to see me hanged, and you'll know how you'll look when Buffalo Bill strings you up," sharply said Sherman, and the laugh was on Casey, who at once arose intending to strike the youth when Gorman sprung between and said:

"That boy is the chief's prisoner, Casey, and if you touch him, I'll knife yer."

Gorman was a man to be feared when aroused, and his great strength was well-known, and Casey had no desire to face him in a fight with any weapons.

He saw, too, that the outlaws were with Gorman for protecting the boy, as several called out:

"You begun it, Casey, so let up."

"Waal, I don't want no trouble with ther chief, you bet, so you escapes, youngster, and I advise yer to keep yer mouth shut."

Sherman laughed and replied:

"You talk big to a boy who is a prisoner and in irons, but sneak off when a man faces you."

Casey caught Gorman's eye and got up and walked away and the breeze that threatened to be a storm blew over.

The day seemed a long and weary one to Sherman Canfield, but at last the shadows lengthened, the canyon was cast in gloom and night fell.

The camp-fires were built and supper was soon ready, after which the men sat around smoking their pipes and talking, as was their wont.

"I'm on watch to-night, but I'm gittin' all fixed fer you and me, and you'll have ther fun o' seein' Casey hung, I guess," whispered Doyle to the prisoner, as he got up and went toward his cabin.

But he did not stay long inside, watching to see that all the men were around the several fires, all except Gorman who was not visible.

Knowing that the light of the two fires kept the men from seeing back in the darkness, Sherman slipped out of the cabin, having arranged his blankets to look as though he was in them.

He went back of the cabins, along the base of the cliffs, and halted in the shadow of the cedars there.

Gorman was already there, and he said in a whisper:

"I will unlock your irons—then follow this cliff along for a quarter of a mile until you come to a small canyon, which enter and at the mouth of it, a hundred yards away, you will find two horses and your outfit."

"Put the pack-saddle on one, your riding-saddle on the other and wait there for me to come."

"I understand," whispered Sherman, and picking up his manacles, which he said he wished to carry along as a souvenir, he went slowly along under the shadow of the cliff.

He found the canyon, and at its head the horses, and even in the darkness he saw that they were splendid animals.

He was also delighted with the outfit, as far as he could see, and had his horses saddled and weapons in hand when a horseman rode into the canyon.

It was Gorman, and he said quickly:

"Come, boy pard, for we have a long ride and I must be back before dawn."

He led the way down the canyon, and after a couple of miles came to a narrow chasm in a cliff, which they passed through, coming out into a broad, shallow stream beyond.

CHAPTER XLIII.

THE SECRET HIDING-PLACE.

THE chasm in the cliff which Gorman led the way through was a very narrow one, scarcely five feet in width, and the walls on either side towered hundreds of feet above the heads of the riders.

Here and there the cliff met above, from large pieces of rock breaking off and becoming chucked in between the walls in their descent.

Scrub cedars and pines grew in the crevices of the canyon, and on the side which formed the bank of the stream the whole ridge, was thickly covered with an undergrowth which completely concealed the chasm, causing it to look solid.

The stream was a broad one and shallow, and riding into it, Gorman turned down it, the water coming up to the stirrups.

He held on in the water for several miles, when the other shore began to look less black and dismal, and crossing, the depth almost lifting the horses off their feet, they came out at a regular trail where wild animals sought a drinking-place, and which was also a crossing-place for Indians on their hunts, when they sought the country lying beyond for big game.

Once out of the stream, Gorman led the way at a gallop, and this was kept up for miles, not a word being said between them.

At last he came to a halt, and said:

"Do you see anything familiar about you?"

"Well, yes, I have passed here before."

"You did on your way to Overland City."

"The country where the Gold Ghouls' retreat is all suppose to be impassable, almost, to the foot of man, and yet you have seen that it is not."

"Yonder mountain you see is in just another such a country, and there will be your retreat until I join you."

"Keep on for the mountain and halt until daylight when you get near it."

"Then consult your map and follow its directions, and you will find a retreat as safe as the one you have been a prisoner in."

"Look for me in a week or ten days, and make yourself comfortable until I come."

"Do you see this horse I am riding?"

"Yes."

"It is Doyle's favorite animal, and will add another link to the chain of evidence against him."

"Let me tell you that he came to me and had a talk."

"What did he say?"

"He told me he would aid my escape and got me to give him a paper giving him half interest in my mine, wherever that may be."

"You did so?"

"Of course."

"Good! it will be found on him, and that will be another evidence against him."

"Ah! I had not thought of that—so it will."

"And I'll see that the key that unlocks your irons is found in his pocket when he is searched."

"It looks as though Doyle was as good as hanged."

"He is; but I must be off."

"Should luck go against me and I do not come to you, you are free at least."

"Yes, and I can never forget what you have done for me, Mr. Gorman."

"Nor what you have done for me, for the sight of you, my boy, recalled me to myself, and has made a new man of me."

"I will not say good-by, but good-night," and with a firm grasp of the hand Gorman leaped into his saddle and dashed away, soon disappearing in the darkness.

For a few minutes Sherman Canfield stood like one dazed.

Never in his life before had he seemed so utterly alone in the world.

The gold-hunters were all gone, his dear friend Nick among them, and he seemed like an outcast.

At last the thought came over him that he was free.

He was no longer a captive to the merciless Gold Ghouls.

He had two splendid horses, a pack with food, ammunition and blankets in plenty.

He was splendidly armed, and the morning would reveal to him that there was a safe retreat for him.

He gained his spirits quickly, and mounting, took the mountain peak as his beacon of hope and rode on.

It seemed to grow no nearer for a long while, but at last he reached the foot-hills and he came to a halt.

He would rest until dawn.

This he did, unsaddling his horses and staking them out.

He was quickly asleep and the sun shining in his face awoke him.

Recalling all that the night had brought for him he arose quickly, bundled up his blankets, took a bath in the stream near and ate a cold breakfast from the haversack Gorman had hung to his saddle.

Then in the broad daylight he had a look at his horses and his outfit, and was delighted with everything.

"Why I am rich," he said with a pleased look breaking over his face.

Then he got out the map, and after studying it found just where he was, and mounting pressed on.

The trail led him, following the map's directions, by a way that he felt very sure he could not be tracked or discovered, and at noon he came to the end of his journey, a little valley in the very summit of the mountain, with grass, wood and water in plenty, and what was more, a small log cabin.

He had reached the goal he had started for.

CHAPTER XLIV.

THE VICTIM.

It was an hour before dawn when Gorman turned the horse of Doyle loose with the rest of the herd, the animal being well blown and with the fresh saddle marks upon him.

He slipped along the cliff to the cabin, and, just as he had expected, found Doyle, though on guard, sleeping soundly as he leant back against a tree near the fire, which had burned low.

He crept into his cabin, then, and was soon fast asleep.

The sun had not risen when one of the outlaws called out, as he came from his cabin and approached the fire:

"Come, Father Doyle, you sleep soundly for a man on watch.

"Get up and replenish the fire for Gorman will be out to get breakfast soon."

The man sprung to his feet and said roughly:

"You sit up all night, as I have done, and I guesses you'd want to sleep when daylight came."

Gorman then came out and began to get breakfast, and when it was ready the outlaws all gathered about and then it was that some one asked:

"Where's the young game-cock?"

"Call him, Doyle," said Gorman quietly and the man went to the cabin to obey.

But he quickly sung out:

"He hain't here."

"Who has seen the kid?" asked Gorman anxiously.

No one replied, and then all began to look about for him.

But he was nowhere to be seen.

"He can't hobble far with them irons on, and he couldn't ride with 'em, that's sart'in."

"He's playin' hide and seek to skeer us, for that boy hev got more devil in him to the squar' inch than any kid I ever seen."

"We must find him, men," said Gorman, and just then came the cry from Doyle:

"Thar comes ther chief."

All was excitement at once and the men forgot their breakfast in their anxiety to find the young prisoner.

The chief, masked and gowned as usual, came on at a gallop and halting near the fire asked:

"What is the flurry, men?"

"We have just missed the boy prisoner, sir," answered Gorman.

"He must be found or some one's neck will stretch," was the stern rejoinder.

But the youth could not of course be found and the chief asked:

"When was he seen last?"

"He went to bed early last night, sir."

"Ironed?"

"Yes, sir."

"The same manacles he had on when I was last here?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then if he is gone he was aided to escape."

"Who was on guard last night?"

"It was Doyle's night on, sir."

"Where is he?"

"Gone to bed, I guess, sir."

"I want him."

A call was made and Doyle approached, and the chief roared:

"You were on guard last night?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where is that boy?"

"I does not know, chief."

"Well, I'll know."

"Put that man in irons, for he has either helped that boy to escape or allowed some one else to do so."

"I noticed as I came along a white horse that has been recently very hard ridden—whose is he?"

"Doyle owns a white horse," said one.

"Go and bring the animal here, for he is not far away."

The animal was soon brought and all knew that it was Doyle's horse, and he showed that he had been ridden hard during the night.

Doyle's saddle and bridle were also wet with sweat.

"Search that man, for he has been paid for this," cried the chief.

Gorman and Slayback did the searching, and the outlaw lieutenant, Brandon, took the things found on him as they were handed to him by the searchers.

Doyle was now as white as a sheet, and he could hardly stand when the tell-tale paper Gorman had told Sherman Canfield of, was found upon him, along with the key of the prisoner's manacles, and then too the "divvy document" given him by the youth.

The first paper revealed his treachery, that he intended to betray his comrades, and that was enough.

In vain he protested his innocence, for seeing was believing, and without having dismounted from his horse the chief said:

"Hang him at once, and then all of you scatter in pursuit of that boy."

"I'll give a thousand dollars to the man who catches him, and he cannot be far away, for he does not know the country."

"If you cannot take him alive kill him, for he bears a deadly secret against us, though I hardly believe he could find the way back here."

"Yes, two thousand dollars to the man who takes the boy dead or alive."

"Now up with that traitor!"

Protesting his innocence and shrieking for mercy the victim was quickly swung up into the air, and the chief turned and rode to his cabin with the cool remark:

"Bring my breakfast to my cabin, Gorman, and I am very hungry."

The men, before starting in pursuit of the youth, were told to carry all of their traps and report at the old retreat, for Gorman would alone be left at that one, and should the scouts discover it, he could readily find a hiding-place.

Then the chief rode away, the men also, some of them driving off the horses, and Gorman was left alone in the retreat, and he muttered as he saw the last one disappear:

"Well, this has worked right into my hands."

"Now to cut Doyle down and bury him."

"He was the victim, but he deserved his fate."

"I will wait here for a week, and then leave, and the chief shall receive a note that the boy did not go to the fort, but struck for the lower mines, and the scouts know nothing of his escape, or how to find the retreat."

"I shall also tell the chief that I resign from the band and go away, but no act of mine will ever betray him, owing him my life twice, as I do."

"Yes, I'll take this letter by night to Overland City and then go and join my boy pard, for my Destiny now leads to a better life."

CHAPTER XLV.

THE SCOUT'S DREAM.

BUFFALO BILL returned to the fort in no enviable mood, after his failure to track the outlaws to their retreat.

He had to confess that he was baffled, and that to capture the outlaw band he must try strategy.

The thought that the young gold-hunter was their prisoner, troubled him greatly, and he was anxious to rescue him, well knowing their merciless nature.

He rode back into the fort in a gloomy mood and at once sought headquarters.

"Well, Cody, I hope you have tidings that are good, though I did not see the youth or any prisoners as you came in," said the colonel.

"No, sir, we saw no one, yet I lost a good man."

"Ah! Killed from ambush?"

Buffalo Bill explained what had happened on his expedition, and the colonel said:

"This is too bad, for Scout Jenks was a good man, and to be taken out of life as he was, is to be greatly deplored."

"There is one thing certain, Cody, and that is that we must run those outlaws to death, for they massacred those gold-hunters, they killed Scout Jenks and now have the young man you rescued from the Ranger Regulators a prisoner."

"If you say so, I will give you a force of soldiers to combine with your scouts in hunting them, for the coaches will be the next to suffer from them."

"No, colonel, force can do nothing, sir, but strategy must be used."

"Were that youth rescued he would be of great aid, for he would recognize the ponies of his comrades, and which were taken into Overland City by the outlaws, and he could thus pick out the men."

"I am almost inclined to believe, sir, that the whole outlaw outfit can be found in Overland City, the mines and the settlement."

"You may be right; but how about their retreat, where they must assemble and keep their booty?"

"They have a retreat, sir, and more than one, I believe, and some one of them must be there all the time; but I believe, though they may meet there when starting upon raids, that most of them hang about the settlement and thus get an idea when to strike, knowing what is going on."

"Their chief is as clever as he is merciless, for I have never seen any one who really knows anything about him, or can tell whether he is pale-face, negro or red skin."

"That is it, sir, and he lives a double life I am sure."

"Now there are several men in Overland City whom I have suspected of being the outlaw chief, and it is just that I intend to find out."

"Who are they?"

"One of them, Colonel Carr, is Death Notch Dick, whom I laid up for repairs for awhile."

"Just the man to suspect too."

"He is, sir, for he is playing a part I am sure, and in spite of his boasted pluck cried for his life when I had him at a vantage; but I will soon know about him."

"And there are others you suspect?"

"Yes, sir, the man they call Golden George the Gambler."

"I have heard of him."

"He is a dashing fellow in his way, sir, lives by cards, and has a very strong following of men who do not work for a living."

"He may not go in the field as chief, but he still might be the head imp to plot, plan and order, and I shall keep my eye on him to see what he does do when not gambling."

"Is there another you suspect of being the leader?"

"Yes, sir, there is."

"It is some one you do not care to name?"

"I would not wish to, sir, save to you, and in fact all are simply under my suspicion, as the Gold Ghouls chief keeps so completely unknown and yet appears to know all that goes on, just when to strike a coach with money aboard, or make a raid that will pay."

"To be so posted he either lives in Overland City, or has spies there who are men who keep him well informed."

"If I can hit upon the chief all will be well, and if I can rope in a spy it will lead to the wiping out of the band, but to attempt to catch them by force I do not see how it can be done unless we catch them in a body at their deviltry, sir, and push them to the end of the trail."

"That is just my way of looking at it, Buffalo Bill, and I will be glad to have you go about the capture of these outlaws in your own way."

"Thank you, sir, I will endeavor to render a good report in time, for it cannot be quickly done save by a lucky accident."

"There is no hurry; but now as to this third person you have under suspicion?"

"You know of Montebello, the Mexican, sir?"

"Who does not in this country?"

"He is the one whom I suspect, colonel."

Colonel Carr looked both surprised and pained, and said reproachfully:

"But, Cody, Don Montebello is a Mexican *caballero* of great wealth, of splendid family, was an officer in the Mexican service, and is a royally good fellow, generous to a fault, brave and has many friends among the officers at the fort."

"I know all that he is, colonel, openly, but I am not so sure that he does not live a double life as many others do."

"You have some reason for saying this?"

"Really, Colonel Carr, I have nothing more than a suspicion that originated in a dream."

"In a dream?"

"Yes, sir, and strange to say I have had a dream in which he figured no less than three times."

"What was the dream, Cody?"

"First, sir, I dreamt that I was fired at from ambush, and the bullet proved fatal."

"As I lay upon the ground, Don Montebello came up and told me that he had fired the shot."

"My second dream was that we had captured the masked Gold Ghouls, and when I unmasked the chief, it was Don Montebello."

"The third dream was a few nights ago, when my old pard, Tom Taylor, whom the Gold Ghouls killed, appeared to me and said:

"Don Montebello is your man to hang, and that ends the Gold Ghouls."

CHAPTER XLVI.

BUFFALO BILL TURNS SHADOWER.

In spite of himself, Colonel Carr was impressed by the earnest manner in which Buffalo Bill told his dream, and after a moment's thought said:

"Well, Cody, dreams are strange things, and it is hard to understand them."

"That you should three times have such a dream, with no thought against Don Montebello before, I cannot comprehend, and yet it is hard to condemn a man on a dream."

"It seems so, sir; but I shall take just enough stock in my dreams to keep Don Montebello under my eye along with Death-lick Dick and gambler Golden George, when I am sure, the lightning is going to strike, sir."

"Go cautiously where the Don is concerned, Cody."

"I will, sir, and with all, for I wish to make no mistake."

"I'd as soon be killed in earnest as by accident, and I feel the same way about those I suspect. I am going to be sure of my man before I strike."

"I feel that you can be trusted, Buffalo Bill."

"But what is your plan of action?"

"There is to be a weekly coach leave Overland City from next week, I believe, sir?"

"Yes."

"And one to arrive every week, sir?"

"Yes."

"I would like to carry an official envelope each time, sir, to Overland City, and go after one from the return coach, colonel."

"But there may be no dispatches to send, Cody, oftener than once a month."

"That is where I wished to ask your help, sir, to have your adjutant write several each week, bogus ones, addressed to the adjutant of Fort Douglass, who must be posted to send back dispatches weekly."

"This will give me an excuse to go into the settlement twice a week, and I'll manage to stay awhile each time, gamble a little, pretend to spree considerably and have chats with the boys."

"Now and then one of my men can take my place, going as a scout one day, and in

uniform as a soldier the next, and they might pick up what I missed, for they shall be thoroughly posted."

"In other words, Cody, as the detectives say, you intend to shadow the Gold Ghouls to their doom."

"That is just it, sir, and I believe we can do it with your kind aid."

"Take the fort, Cody," said the colonel with a smile, "if you need it; but candidly, I believe you are on the right track, that you are pushing strong in the direction to win, and do not hesitate to make what demands on me that you need, and I will promptly meet them."

"I know that, Colonel Carr, and thank you, sir."

"I will send for the adjutant and have him write at once to Fort Douglass and request dispatches—if bogus—by each coach and to look for others from Rattler, and, in case they might be captured by Gold Ghouls, it would be well to have them appear genuine."

"A splendid idea, sir."

"Now I will go and pick out the two scouts who are to be in my secret, to go in my place at times, and I have an idea, sir, of pretending to let one man go, so he can go to the mines and hunt work, for he can do a great deal by being constantly on the scene, and I will have Doctor Duke Dillon too as an ally."

"Cody, you are going about this like a general preparing his plan of campaign, and it cannot fail," said the colonel with considerable enthusiasm.

The adjutant was sent for, and after some further conversation with the two officers Buffalo Bill took his leave and went to his own quarters.

There, flying at half-mast over the cabin of the chief of scouts, was his own flag.

It was an embroidered field, representing a prairie, in the midst of which was a buffalo, on the side of which was branded the name:

"BILL."

while in the distance were a band of mounted scouts coming at full speed toward the buffalo.

Calling to one of his men Buffalo Bill said:

"Sit down, Ernest, for I wish to have a talk with you."

"You were a miner before you took to scouting I believe?"

"I was a guide in Texas, sir, and ranger, guided a party of miners up into Colorado and then went to mining, but gave it up to come with you."

"Well, Ernest, I wish you to go back to mining again."

"Oh, chief! do I not suit you?" cried Ernest Ames quickly and excitedly.

"You do, and that is just why I wish you to turn miner, to go to Overland City, buy you an outfit, and set to work, and at the same time shadow three men, trying also to find out who are Gold Ghouls, and who are their spies and connected with them."

"Oh, yes, sir, I'll turn miner with pleasure," said Ernest with a smile.

"Now go and fetch Baldy Benson here and Jack Hardy, and I'll tell you a game I am going to play to win, and which you have got to hold hands in, and play only trump cards."

Ernest Ames hastily departed, but was soon back with Jack Hardy and Baldy Benson, three as fine specimens of manhood as one would wish to meet.

They heard the chief's plan of action, were told to breathe it to no one, not even the other scouts, and when Jack and Baldy went to Overland City as couriers, what their duties were to be, while Ernest was to go at once and begin mining, or in other words play the detective.

CHAPTER XLVII.

DON MONTEBELLO THE GOLD KING.

THE stage-coach began on its weekly runs out of Overland City a few days after the talk Buffalo Bill had with Colonel Carr, and the turning three of his men into scout shadowers, to ferret out who the Gold Ghouls were.

The coach was to leave Overland City at nine o'clock, taking the mail that came from

the camps, settlement and fort, and Buffalo Bill was sent with the little batch of dispatches to go through eastward, for the fort mail was sent the evening before by a regular rider.

Going along at a swift canter, as he neared the long up-hill trail leading to Overland City, his little batch of dispatches stuck in his belt, Buffalo Bill drew rein as he came to a steep ascent to give his horse a minute's rest.

As he did so he saw a horseman coming toward him down the trail.

"Well, he's a dandy for looks," muttered the scout, and he meant it, for the horseman was indeed one to see and remember.

Horse and man were alike in their bearing which was haughty and magnificent.

The horse was a long-bodied, clean-limbed stallion, as black as jet, with an embroidered bridle and massive silver bit, while a breast-strap was also embroidered and ornamented with silver.

The saddle was a most gorgeous affair, with housings embroidered, and studded with silver, even the stirrups being of the same precious metal.

With long flowing mane and tail the splendid animal stepped along as though he bore an emperor upon his back.

But the rider!

He was a man of splendid physique, six feet in height, broad-shouldered, straight as an arrow, sat in the saddle with the air of one who knew his power and held his head up with a haughty air of conscious dignity and importance.

He was dressed in a velvet jacket of the Mexican pattern, embroidered with gold lace, and ornamented with solid gold buttons.

His pants were of snow-white broad-cloth, fitting close, and stuck in enameled boot-tops that came above his knees and were armed with massive gold spurs.

He wore a white silk shirt, with a scarf knotted under the large collar that was turned over his jacket, and in a broad, embroidered belt about his waist, upon either side, were thrust, without holster, a large revolver, gold mounted.

Upon his head was a broad-brimmed, soft sombrero, turned up in a rakish manner, and encircled by a gold chain to the end of which hung a miniature gold revolver and dagger as ornaments.

And the face?

It was darkly bronzed, betokening the Mexican race, and every feature was cast in a perfect mold.

He wore a full black beard, the ends of his long mustache curling upward, and his eyes were large and full of expression, a slumbering fire seeming to dwell back in their dark depths.

One odd part of his costume was that he wore a silk handkerchief like a cap bound about his head, and of the brightest hues of yellow, scarlet and blue, his hat fitting over it and set upon one side.

Such was this remarkable man in appearance as he rode toward Buffalo Bill who muttered to himself:

"He looks, indeed, the Gold King they call him."

And this was the man who had come under the suspicion of Buffalo Bill through a dream!

He was a Mexican, he said, a man of rank and riches, and he had come to the mines to look after interests he held there, and he was known to hold many shares in claims and employ a number of men.

He was generous, and in spite of his haughty appearance was ever courteous to all, and had a genial word for the meanest man in the mines.

A popular man he was, too, and he had become a favorite in the settlement, at the fort and the ranches, while he lived on a ranch of his own a mile from Overland City.

He had proven himself fully able to take care of himself when attacked or insulted, yet never sought trouble, and when he gambled it was for amusement, as he always insisted upon paying back money won from a poor man, and if this was refused it was spent in treating the crowd.

If he found any one to play for a large sum he would never flinch if he lost heavily and seemed never to have his temper ruffled in the slightest.

"Ho, Chief Buffalo Bill, I am glad to meet you."

"I am just on my way to the fort to dine with Captain Detrick."

"You are well, I hope?"

He spoke in a richly toned voice, yet with a marked Mexican accent, and his smile revealed two rows of milk-white teeth.

"Thank you, Don Montebello, I am well, and Captain Detrick hailed me as I came away and asked me to tell you, if I saw you, not to forget your promise for to-day."

"I could never forget a pleasure in store; but let me congratulate you upon your punishment of that man Death Notch Dick the other day—they say it was grand."

"He forced it upon himself, sir."

"Yes, and I hope we will have no more of the Ranger Regulators now."

"Or the Gold Ghoul, for they are becoming more and more dangerous."

"Yes, it is so, and to be regretted; but some day you will run them down, I hope," and with a courteous salute Don Montebello, the Gold King, rode on, while Buffalo Bill muttered:

"And that is the man my dream causes me to suspect."

CHAPTER XLVIII.

TWO PARDS.

THE spot which Sherman Canfield had so faithfully followed the trail laid down in Gorman's map to, was an ideal hiding-place.

There was a canyon running back from a large stream, the entrance being narrow and not appearing any more like an opening in the rocky ridge it penetrated than the rest of the towering cliffs did.

The soil leading to the canyon received no impression from an iron-shod hoof for several miles, and upon reaching the stream Sherman had been guided as to where to cross by watching the pictured outline of the map.

Once in the canyon, after a short distance it expanded into a valley, and a beautiful one.

It went a mile back into the mountains, was walled in all around by towering cliffs, impassable for a horse, and within was timber in plenty, good soil, and a brook that flowed from springs that were icy cold.

The little cabin had once been the home of Gorman himself, for he had passed a year there once in the search for gold, he and a pard whose grave was not far away, and who had been killed in a brush miles away with Indians.

Staking out his horses, Sherman Canfield prepared to make himself at home.

He got some brush and swept out the cabin, after which he spread his blanket bed, and he saw that Gorman had supplied him well.

He next unpacked his provisions and found that he had a most bountiful supply, and these were stored away.

The map told him to build his fire in a natural fire-place back in the cliff, where the smoke went up through the crevices of the rocks and never appeared to be visible from any of the surrounding country.

He went to gather wood and came upon the lonely grave of the dead pard of his outlaw friend.

Wild flowers were growing upon the grave, and upon the tree at its head, had been cut the following simple story:

"ED. NEAL,

My Partner."

Sherman Canfield stood for some time gazing upon the grave and it impressed him deeply, while he mused:

"Gorman Field is a noble man at heart, and it is sad indeed that his life has thus far been a curse to him."

After having cooked and enjoyed a good meal, Sherman went out to get some game, for Gorman had told him that the sound of a shot there in the canyon would never be heard outside.

He killed an antelope, and shouldering it carried it back to his cabin, in which as night came on he built a fire.

That he felt lonely there was no doubt, but he consoled himself by saying:

"It is better than being in the Gold

Ghoul, camp with a noose about my neck, and the whole outfit except Gorman willing to string me up."

"No, this is the place for me until I can find that mine and clear myself of the shadow upon me, if the package I stuck in the river is lost."

"I will find out if it is as soon as Gorman comes, and then we will know what to do very quickly."

"But if I have to hunt for the mine, I guess I can do a little avenging work on my own hook at the same time, for every time I see a Gold Ghoul I'll shoot to kill, as it will be helping Buffalo Bill, and avenging my poor comrades and the sergeant, not to speak of myself, for what they did to me."

"If it had not been for Pard Gorman they would have killed me, I am certain of that, when the chief felt sure I would not tell him where the sergeant's mine was."

"I've got a score to settle too with those Ranger Regulators, so I guess I'll be rather busy here in these mountains."

"Now to look to see if my horses are all right, and then for a good night's sleep."

He did sleep well and awoke greatly refreshed.

The day passed, the night, and another and another and then he began to look for the coming of his outlaw pard, Gorman.

A week went by, and one morning as he looked out of his cabin he saw approaching a horseman.

To seize his rifle was the work of an instant, but it was at once lowered when he recognized Gorman.

He was well mounted and led a well loaded pack-horse behind him.

Rushing to meet him Sherman gave the outlaw a warm welcome, and the latter said earnestly:

"I've taken off the yoke I wore, Sherman, and am a free man."

"I left the retreat yesterday afternoon, held up the coach on the trail, and handed the driver a letter to mail, and it was to the chief, and in cipher so no one could read it."

"The driver and two passengers were dumb with amazement at not being murdered or robbed, and I enjoyed their looks."

"But I have no doubt I could have struck a rich haul."

"Having reformed, I did not regret having been honest."

"I am glad to hear you say that, Pard Gorman; but what did you write the chief?"

"That I was going my way alone, but to have no fear that I would betray him, only I was going to turn honest."

"He came to the retreat after I left?"

"Did he?"

"I should say so, and Doyle was hanged half an hour after, for your contract with him was found on him, and in fact circumstantial evidence downed him, or rather, to be more exact, hoisted him; but it was just what he deserved and I would have gotten had I remained with the outfit."

"The band went to the old retreat, until they discovered that you did not guide Buffalo Bill to that one, and I kept house alone until I came away."

"See, I have brought a good share of provisions and other necessities, and we will not starve, or freeze in winter."

"I spent nearly a year here once with the pard who lies over yonder in his grave; but I've got a new one now, and yet bet we will be good ones, and you have the satisfaction of knowing that you reformed a Gold Ghoul, Sherman."

"Now for breakfast," and the two pards set to with a will to make themselves comfortable and prepare for what the future held for them under the new condition of affairs.

CHAPTER XLIX.

LOST.

THE two pards, the man whose life had been wrecked, and whom a cruel fate had driven to outlawry, and the youth who a mere boy in years was a man in deeds and intelligence, became very chummy before their first day was over in their lonely home.

Sherman Canfield had come to feel now that the reformed outlaw was indeed in earnest, that he acted from no desire for gold and what he could get out of him, but from

real goodness of nature and to lead a different life.

He had brought with him his all in life, all that he had saved up before he became a lawless outcast and since, and that night as the two sat in the cabin together, while a bright fire burned on the hearth, Gorman Field said:

"See here, boy pard, I haven't counted my fortune of late, so we will do it now, for as we are partners half of it is yours you know, and it is well to know what our stock in trade is and the capital to back it up."

"Oh, no, I couldn't think of sharing your savings with you."

"But you must, for we are partners for all we have—that goes, Sherman, so we'll have our inventory of stock, so write down as I call out."

"All right, go ahead," and Sherman took a pencil and paper.

"I am counting our combined stock in trade, you know."

"That's right."

"Four horses."

"Yes."

"Two saddles and bridles, two pack-saddles, a dozen blankets, Navaho and Mexican make, half a dozen rubber blankets, as many horse-blankets, six lariats, six stake ropes, provisions for two for a couple of months."

"Yes, I've got all down."

"Clothes for two, taken from the Gold Ghoul's storehouse."

"Yes."

"Boots and hats."

"All right."

"Two blanket overcoats."

"Yes."

"And now come the weapons."

"Fire away."

"Four repeating-rifles, two carbines, one shotgun, seven revolvers, three bowie-knives, ammunition for all to last a long time, two axes, two picks, two shovels, a couple of sieves, cooking utensils, three hatchets, nails, rope and some et ceteras."

"All down."

"Now to the valuables, and fortunately I drew my share a few weeks ago."

"I have a couple of bags of loose gold, worth a thousand dollars, three hundred in paper money, six hundred in gold and silver coin, two gold watches and chains, and some odds and ends of jewelry, all of the last named gotten through Gold Ghoul robberies of passengers of the Overland, of course; yes, all save the bags of loose gold; but if we get rich, some day we will give the value of the ill-gotten things to some charity, and thus square ourselves."

"We'll do it, though we may have to fall back on it yet before we get rich," answered Sherman, with a laugh.

"Well, we are young yet, and this is not a bad start."

"If you find the mine of Sergeant Fessenden, we can expect big things; but if we do not, we can get along."

"Pard Gorman, I must find that mine."

"I gave a solemn pledge to the dying sergeant that I would go to it and work it for the benefit of his wife and daughter, and he gave me a half interest in it."

"I'll tell you the truth now; he gave me a map, papers, his watch and other valuables, and where I could find the gold he had already dug and hidden away was told in his papers."

"For all he made me a half partner, and wrote a statement to that effect, or rather I wrote it at his dictation and he signed it."

"All these things, when I was rounded up by the Gold Ghoul, as I was in the middle of the stream, I had rolled up in one package, along with his revolvers and knife, and they were tied up in a rubber coat and blanket."

"I took the sergeant's sword from the scabbard, dropped the latter into the river, and thrusting the sword through the strings about the package, leant over and stuck the point in the bottom, where the water was three feet deep."

"I pushed it hard down to the hilt, by using the butt of my rifle, and there left it."

"If it is there we will have no trouble; but if it has washed away then I must take my memory of the sergeant's description and try and find the mine."

"There is but one way to find out, Sherman."

"By going to see?"

"Yes."

"Well, when can we go?"

"To-morrow night if you wish, for we had better move by night for awhile."

"We can make the search by day, hiding our horses and ourselves on the bank."

"I will be glad to be relieved of the suspense of the affair, I assure you," replied Sherman, and it was decided to start the next night.

This they did, and Sherman found the ex-outlaw a splendid guide, for he knew every foot of ground it seemed near Overland City.

They reached the river before dawn and Gorman Field soon found a good hiding-place, and they returned to their blankets for a few hours.

Then, when it was day, they reconnoitered well, and stripping off their clothes went out to the rock, which was Sherman's landmark.

It took a very short search to show the youth that the sword had either been drawn up by the current, or by some one who had seen it in crossing, for it was gone and the package near it.

They made a thorough search and found nothing, so they were compelled to give it up.

This they did, and returning to their hiding-camp they talked it over, both seeming to dread that some of the Gold Ghouls, or some one else, in crossing the stream had discovered the package.

That night they started upon the trail for their retreat, determined soon after to go in search of the sergeant's mine.

But, upon their return they came very near running upon a deadly danger, yet, as it happened it turned out well for them, and they made use of it for the good of others.

What that danger was another chapter will reveal later.

CHAPTER L.

AS A SCOUT DETECTIVE.

BUFFALO BILL reached Overland City, after meeting Don Montebello, in ample time for the out-going stage, and he handed his dispatches into the driver's hands with the remark that they were important.

A number of miners and others had gathered to see the stage depart, and they saw the chief of scouts deliver the dispatches and heard his words.

Death Notch Dick was there, his arms in a sling, and going up to him Buffalo Bill asked in a kindly way how he was.

"All right, pard."

"I'll be well afore long, and I don't hold any hard feelin' ag'in' you in the least."

"It is very kind of you, Death Notch Dick; but as I did the work I'll pay the doctor."

"Where is he to be found?"

"I guess he's at his cabin, for he's livin' in Overland now."

"But what was the matter that you dismissed Scout Ernest from yer band, Bill?"

"I didn't dismiss him, for he was a good man."

"He's left you."

"Yes, the pay of a scout is not enough to get rich on you know, and Ernest was an old miner, so wanted to go back to gold-digging again, and I had to give him up."

"Waal, he'll do well, for he's already struck it rich."

"No!"

"Yes, he came here and bought the old deserted Bad Luck Mine, payin' only a few dollars for it, for nobody wanted it, and that's how I know'd he were here, when they told me he got ter work four days ago and struck payin' dirt the very next day."

"Well, I am glad to hear it, for he deserves good luck."

"I'll drop in and congratulate him on his good fortune," and Buffalo Bill mounted his horse and rode away.

He went to the cabin of Doctor Dillon and found that gentleman at home.

He had a very large and comfortable cabin, using one room for his office, another as his bedroom and a third for his kitchen and eating-room.

A Chinaman whom he called Ding-Dong was his servant and was as shrewd an individual as ever smoked opium, though he had an expression of holiness upon his face

that would have fitted well a Methodist deacon.

The doctor welcomed the scout warmly, ordered Ding-Dong to bring some glasses and cigars, and remarked:

"What do you think of my John Chinaman, Bill?"

"He's a dandy."

"You are right, Ding Dong is a dandy."

"He's cunning as a fox, professes the innocence of a lamb, has a temper like a tiger, and wears under that blouse of his no less than four revolvers and two knives."

"I saved him from being hanged by a mob once, and again kept him from dying when he got poisoned, and he swears by me, and is as true as steel, while he generally hates every other man in Overland City; but is there any news?"

"Some, which I will tell you, and I have come to find out what you know?"

"I believe Death Notch Dick is about as black a villain as I know, and you must look out for him."

"I will."

"Ding-Dong is going to help me in some ferret work for you, Bill, and no one would be better."

"I guess you are right, for you can trust him, with the hold on him that you have."

Buffalo Bill then made known his scheme to shadow certain men in the camp, and Doctor Dillon promised him his help.

Then the scout went on the search for Ernest Ames and found him in his mine, and alone.

"I hear you have struck it rich already, Ernest."

"I struck a lot in a bag, several hundreds, chief, that some poor fellow had hidden away and then got killed I suppose; but it pays well, and I may pick up more."

"I hope so; but any news?"

"Nothing to tie to yet, sir, but I am on the alert."

"So is Doctor Dillon and his Chinese servant, and we'll strike it rich yet I feel."

"I met Montebello to-day, and saw Death Notch, but have not yet run across Golden George."

"He's away now, chief; but I'll trust none of them, and you look out for Death Notch," was Ernest Ames's parting advice to Buffalo Bill.

CHAPTER LI.

A MYSTERIOUS WARNING.

BUFFALO BILL spent an hour or two in Overland City, after leaving Ernest Ames, in idling about the tavern and the saloons.

He saw Death Notch Dick again and had another talk with him, and, after dinner at the tavern mounted his horse and started upon the return trail to Fort Rattler.

He did not ride very fast, and was going quietly along the rocky trail near the spot where he had so opportunely arrived upon the scene in time to save Sherman Canfield from the Ranger Regulators, when he was surprised to see drop before him, from on top of a high cliff near, a stone to which was tied a slip of paper.

He at once dismounted and picked it up.

Without breaking it loose from the rock, he unfolded the paper and read:

"Do not return by the trail you came."

"You are fearless I know, but no courage will avail against a coward foe in ambush."

"If you value your life take another trail back to the fort, for, not very far from here deadly enemies are in hiding to kill you."

"YOUR UNKNOWN SHADOWER."

"Well! who wrote this, and is it a bluff, a blind or the truth?" said the scout when he had read it.

He looked upward and saw only the cedar-fringed cliff towering hundreds of feet above him.

The stone and its warning had certainly come from off the cliff.

The stone was a small one, a string was tied to it and then around the warning.

The latter was written in a distinct hand, with pencil and on half a sheet of note paper.

Buffalo Bill did not remember to have ever seen the writing before.

To reach the top of the cliff he would have to ride back a mile and ascend a trail there

that meant another mile to the spot from whence the stone had been thrown.

By the time he reached there the one who had warned him could have over two miles the start of him.

It was doubtful, too, if he would leave any trail in the hard soil on top of the cliff. If he was not mounted, he certainly would not.

So argued the scout. Then he asked himself if he should heed the warning.

At first he decided that it seemed to have been written in good faith, and it was best for him to do so, for as the one who had warned him very truly said, what could a brave man do against a coward in ambush?

Then came the thought to the scout that the out-going stage traveled that trail for fully a mile further, and something might have happened to that which it was wished to cover up.

If he took another trail to the fort, he would have to turn off on a trail not a quarter of a mile ahead, and if anything had gone wrong with the coach, he would not know it.

So, all things considered, he decided to go on as he had started.

He remembered the warning to keep his eye on Death Notch Dick, but then he had left him back in Overland City.

He thought then, strange to say, of Don Montebello, the Gold King, who had gone on to the fort.

Then his mind turned upon Golden George, the gambler, whom he remembered scout Ernest had said was just then away from Overland City.

Reading over the warning again, he thrust it and the stone into his pocket and his mind was made up as to what he would do.

He had sat upon his horse undecided for several minutes; but, he would hesitate no longer.

He would go on, and by the trail he had been so mysteriously warned he must not take, as death lurked there for him.

Looking to his revolvers and with his rifle across his saddle, he glanced up at the cliff, saw no one, and rode on.

He had disregarded the mysterious warning.

CHAPTER LII.

AN UNKNOWN FRIEND.

BUFFALO BILL, though he determined to take chances, went along with a full realization that he must be ready to meet any danger there was.

He felt that he was taking his life in his hands, and he did so without fear of the result, once he made up his mind, for if death came through it he would meet it as bravely as man should.

His horse was a splendid animal, for he rode no other kind, and long association with the chief of scouts had made him like his master, sensitive to danger and watchful in a wonderful degree.

"Keep your eyes and ears open, old fellow, for we may be fired upon."

"Watch for 'em sharp," said the scout, speaking as he would to a hunting dog, and the horse seemed to understand the warning and at once pricked up his ears.

There was something in the falling stone and fluttering paper, the halt of the scout, and then cautious advance which the horse seemed to have instinctively set down as a warning, and he now moved forward with light tread, watchful eyes, and ears set for the slightest sound.

So horse and rider went on to face the ordeal they had been warned lay in their path.

After a quarter of a mile the scout came to where he could turn off on another, though longer trail to the fort.

He went calmly by.

Another quarter of a mile and he beheld ahead of him the very spot for an ambush.

It was a pass between groups of rocks, covered with cedars, a kind of natural gateway between, though a natural breastwork, for it was thrown up like a fort just there.

Upon one side the line of piled-up rocks, overgrown with cedars, ran to the edge of the river, the same in which Sherman Canfield had left the sergeant's package.

On the other side the cedar grown rocks

ran to the high line of cliffs along which the trail led at the base.

Buffalo Bill was within three hundred yards of the spot when his eye took in its position for an ambush.

"If there is an ambush, it is right there," he muttered, and then settled himself more firmly in the saddle and grasped his rifle with ready grip.

Nearer and nearer he approached until he got within a hundred feet of the rocks, when suddenly there was a sharp report, followed quickly by another and a yell of pain.

But the shot had not come from the rocks, but above.

The quick glance upward of the scout had revealed a puff of smoke over the edge of the cliff, and just beyond the line of rocks in the trail.

There the shots had come from.

In an instant Buffalo Bill was ready for battle, and he spurred forward toward the rocks.

As he did so he saw a form running at full speed, and a look backward revealed that the face was masked.

He was running toward the river where two horses were now seen by the scout, as he passed through the break in the rocks.

Instantly his rifle was at his shoulder, his horse came to a sudden halt, and Buffalo Bill fired at the masked outlaw who had turned quickly to pull trigger upon the scout.

But Buffalo Bill was the quickest and the outlaw went down, his rifle being discharged as he fell.

Then the scout looked about him, and there right behind the barrier, not thirty feet from him lay another dead man.

He too wore a mask.

Riding up to him the scout saw that he had a bullet wound in the top of his head, at the back.

He had never known what killed him.

He had been kneeling among the rocks, his rifle resting in a gap before him, and he lay upon his face, his hands yet grasping the weapon, which was cocked, the forefinger almost touching the trigger.

Then Buffalo Bill glanced upward.

No one was visible on the cliff, and the two puffs of smoke had floated away.

The scout rode to the second body, that of the man he had killed.

There was a wound in his back, besides the bullet he had sent through his head.

That accounted for the second shot from the cliff, and the yell of pain.

"Hello! Hello!" shouted the scout, looking up toward the cliff.

No response came.

He took off his sombrero and waved it.

No one answered the signal.

Again he called, and said:

"Ho, pard, show yourself that I may see who it is that has saved my life.

"I did not heed your warning, and but for you I would now be as dead as this fellow at my feet."

Still no reply.

The top of the cliff was nearly five hundred feet above the scout, and to reach there, even on foot, he would have to go a couple of miles in either direction.

He knew that the one who had warned him, seeing that he had not heeded it, had gone along the top of the cliff and fired upon the outlaws in ambush before they could fire upon him.

Hearing the rapid approach of hoofs Buffalo Bill turned to see who was coming.

CHAPTER LIII.

THE DON AND THE SCOUT.

THE one who came into view Buffalo Bill recognized at a glance.

It was Don Montebello the Gold King.

"Ah, Cody, we meet again—What, a dead man!" he cried, as his eyes fell upon the body on the rocks.

Buffalo Bill silently pointed to the other outlaw.

"What! another?"

"Two of them, Don, and two of a kind."

"Who are they?"

"Their masks show."

"I have not yet looked at their faces, but will do so now, and maybe we will recognize them."

"How could we recognize them Cody?"

"Might have seen them in Overland City when they did not consider it necessary to wear masks, Don."

"Very true; but how did it occur, for I heard two quick shots, then two more, so spurred on."

"Oh, simply an attempt to ambush and kill me, Don."

"To kill you, Buffalo Bill?"

"Oh, yes, there is nothing strange in that, for I am threatened all the time, and did not some good angel protect me, I would have been killed hundreds of times."

"And you killed them both after they fired and missed you?"

Oh, no, Don, I was riding into their trap, when my good angel aloft shot one and wounded the other as he skipped away.

"The shots put me on my guard, and I got a bead on that fellow over there as he turned to fire on me—ste?"

"Yes, I congratulate you too, Senor Cody, on your narrow escape, only I don't understand about your good angel."

"That I do not understand myself, Don; but some one warned me by killing this man, and who my unknown protector is I do not know."

"Ah, Cody, you must know."

"You have a secret body-guard."

"See here, Don Montebello, no matter what men have said of me in my life there are two things I have never been accused of, and they are cowardice and being a thief, and I would as soon be one as the other."

"Please do you not insinuate that I take men along secretly to protect me, for I would brand the lie very quickly."

"My dear senor, I made no such charge, only saying that you must have some guard, for this being protected by an unknown foe is a most remarkable coincidence."

"You and I want no quarrel, Senor Cody, for my words were not meant to offend, as when I give an insult it is too pointed to misunderstand."

"All right, Don, I regret mistaking your meaning; but the fact remains that but for some one who fired from yonder cliff I would have been a dead man now."

"See, this bullet entered the back and top of this man's head, and the bullet in the back of yonder man, plowed downward too I will wager, showing that both shots came from above."

"I hailed and called, but got no reply, so who my protector is I am utterly ignorant of, but I thank him with all my heart."

"Most certainly."

"Now to see if I have met these two gentlemen before."

He dismounted as he spoke, turned the body over gently, as though he held no ill will against the dead, and then removed the mask, the Don looking on the while with deepest attention.

"Yes, I have seen this man before, but do not know him."

"I do not recall his face either, but I have certainly seen him," said the Don.

Then they went over to the second body, and he too was unmasked.

"I know this man, for he used to be a miner and was known as Casey," said Buffalo Bill.

"Yes, he worked for me a year ago," the Don said, and added:

"Now, what is to be done, Cody?"

"Don Montebello, you are going to Overland City?"

"Yes."

"Will you kindly report the affair to Doctor Dillon and have him send out a party to bury them, while I wait here, and yet, before you leave, I would like to have you see me search the bodies."

Certainly."

Buffalo Bill did search the bodies, finding, besides their weapons, a belt containing money and jewelry of various kinds, which revealed their trade as road-agents.

In a thicket, close to the water's edge were found their two horses hitched, and they had an outfit for camping fastened to their saddles.

"Don Montebello, to the victor belong the spoils, I suppose, so I will turn this money and jewelry over to you, asking you to place it for the good of poor and sick miners in Overland City, while the horses and their outfit, I will put in for the good of my scouts."

"A fair division, surely Senor Cody, and I accept your commission and will see that the money reaches the most deserving in your name."

"I will also send you help at once," and with a salute, Montebello, the Gold King rode away, leaving Buffalo Bill alone with the dead.

CHAPTER LIV.

KEPT A SECRET.

"Now what am I to think?"

"Is Montebello guilty or not guilty?"

"He was strangely near this scene of ambush set for me."

"One of these men he says worked for him, and if I am not mistaken the other did, too."

"He made me hot when he insinuated I was protected by a secret body-guard."

"Now, who on earth, or up in the sky, is my protector?"

"I give it up; but it is some one who does not wish to be known."

"A man who has done what he has, need not be afraid of showing his face anywhere."

"I could forgive an outlaw for that act."

"This will astonish the colonel, but please him to know that two more of the masked Gold Ghouls have gone to the land of fire-works."

"In the future, if I get another warning, I will heed it only too quick."

"That fellow had a bead on me when he was shot, and the other was to chip in a bullet if I didn't drop dead."

"But the shots from above scared one to death, and sent the other off with a tear down his back that looks ugly," and thus musing after the departure of Don Montebello the Gold King, Buffalo Bill drew off the jacket of the man he had shot, revealing the gash of a bullet from the shoulder to the waist down the back, showing conclusively that the bullet had come from almost over the man.

The scout paced to and fro, while his horse cropped grass, for an hour or more, and then voices were heard and a party of horsemen dashed into view.

Doctor Dillon was along, and a score of others, and they had all heard the story from the Don.

"Doctor, I'll leave the bodies with you, for I will go on to the fort," said Buffalo Bill with a significant look at the doctor, and as he shook hands with him he left a note in the hands of the physician which told the story as he knew it, with the meaning and all, and ended with:

"Keep your eye on the Don."

Mounting his horse and taking the animals of the outlaw in lead, Buffalo Bill went on at a gallop along the trail.

When at last he came to a place where a trail led up on the top of the ridge, he hid the outlaws' horses and rode on up.

Reaching the summit he went rapidly along the ridge back toward the spot where his unknown protector had fired from, and arriving near, he dismounted and continued on foot.

The party had thrown the bodies across the backs of led horses and returned to Overland City, so the scout at once began a thorough search.

But not a trail of horse or man was visible anywhere.

Only, where the one had fired the shots was a stone or two displaced recently, but nothing else.

An hour's search revealed no more, so returning to his horse Buffalo Bill went on his way, taking the outlaws' horses in lead as before.

He rode rapidly, but it was sunset as he reached the fort, and coming in with two led and riderless horses, when every one was out, created a sensation.

"Where did you get them, Bill?" called out the officer of the day, and Buffalo Bill's reply was a significant and silent one, as he held up the two masks he had taken from the faces of the outlaws, and which caused the officer to call out:

"Good for you, Cody!"

"That means three less."

Going to Colonel Carr's quarters Buffalo Bill found that officer seated on a rustic bench under a tree, and he called to him to join him there.

"Whose horses have you, Cody?"

"Gold Ghouls, sir."

"And the riders?"

"Here are their scalps, sir."

The colonel looked up in a startled way, but beholding the masks took them and looked them over carefully, while he said:

"You have three now?"

"Yes, sir."

"How did it happen?"

"In a most unlooked for way, sir."

"Are you hurt?"

"Not at all, sir, though I had as close a shave, Colonel Carr, as I ever had in my life."

"Tell me about it."

"Pardon me, sir, if I first ask you if Don Montebello, the Gold King, was here to-day?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"Will you kindly let your orderly go to see if he visited Captain Detrick at the fort to-day?"

"Certainly."

The orderly was dispatched on his errand to return with the information that Don Montebello had not been at the fort to see Captain Detrick that day, nor had that officer seen him.

"Why do you ask, Cody?"

"I met the Don, sir, just out of Overland City this morning, and Captain Detrick had told me to say to him he was expecting him to dinner and he said he was coming here."

"I met him again this afternoon a few miles out of Overland, and just after I had very nearly lost my life at the hands of men who wore these two masks, and it seemed a coincidence, sir."

"It seems strange, though the Don might have been detained elsewhere in one of his claims; but now tell me your story."

The story was told, from the delivery of the dispatches to the coach-driver, and call on Doctor Dillon and Ernest Ames, to the mysterious warning letter tied to a stone, and the result.

The colonel listened with deepest interest and said:

"Well, Cody, I begin to feel with the soldiers that you bear a charmed life, and glad I am of your escape."

"But I cannot see how we can connect Don Montebello with the affair without direct proof."

"It is proof that I am looking for, colonel," was the answer of the scout and going to his quarters he talked over his escape with his men, yet kept the warning note thrown before him in the trail a secret, as he had from all save Colonel Carr.

CHAPTER LV.

A LETTER OF MYSTERY.

COLONEL CARR thought deeply over the narrow escape of Buffalo Bill, and the scout himself meditated more seriously upon it than he was wont to do where he was himself concerned.

He was seated in his quarters, about to retire for the night, after a long talk with his men, when a soldier from the guard-house came and said to him as he stepped to the door in answer to his knock:

"A letter for you, chief."

"Ah, Foley, thank you."

"Where did you get it?"

"I do not know more, sir, than the corporal of the guard said I was at once bring it to you."

"Thank you," and as the soldier left, Buffalo Bill opened his letter.

It was in an envelope, sealed and addressed as follows:

"Important! Deliver at once!"

"To CHIEF OF SCOUTS, WILLIAM F. CODY—"

"BUFFALO BILL,

"FORT RATTLE.

"By hand of Special Courier."

Buffalo Bill twice read over the address before he tore open the envelope.

He then saw that the handwriting was similar to that of the warning letter tied to the stone, and which he had laid carefully away among his treasures.

The letter was as follows:

"I write to warn Buffalo Bill of deadly danger."

"From undisputed sources I know that he is to be shadowed to death by the Gold Ghouls."

"They fear him, and feel that they have wrongs at his hands to avenge, while, with him removed from their path they would be free to rob and commit other crimes oftener and with far more safety than with him alive and on their track."

"They also believe that he is secretly planning to wipe them out."

"Let him be warned by this letter not to go on any trail alone."

"All trails will soon be ambushed for him, and if alone his death will quickly follow."

"This is no false alarm, but a warning in good faith from"

"AN UNKNOWN FRIEND."

A long, low whistle gave the scout when he had read this letter.

Then he read it carefully again.

His next move was to get the warning note of the afternoon and compare the two.

"One hand wrote both," he muttered.

"Now to find out who brought it."

He arose, put on his hat and walked over to the guard-house.

The corporal was there and said that the sergeant of the guard had given it to him.

The sergeant was called, and he said that it had been given him by the officer of the day.

Then Buffalo Bill went to see the officer of the day.

"Captain Baldwin, I have received a letter under peculiar circumstances, sir."

"Yes, I sent it to you, Cody."

"May I ask how you got it, sir?"

"It came in an odd way."

"It was before the last guard change that the sergeant came to me and reported that the sentinel at the east gate had called the corporal of the guard and delivered to him a letter for you, said to have been handed to him by some one, I don't just recall by whom."

"That sentinel is off duty, sir, so may I ask you to send for him, please?"

"Assuredly," and Captain Baldwin ordered the sentinel just off duty at the east stockade gate to report to him at once.

"My man, tell Mr. Cody just how you received the letter given you for him to-night."

"Yis, sur, I will."

"Will, sur, it was afther this way:

"I was afther being the sintinell at the 'aste gate, sur, and—"

"I know your post, my man, so just tell how you got the letter."

"That is jist what I'm afther duing, sur, ter plaze yer."

"It was afther this way:

"I was afther bein' the sintinell at the 'aste gate, sur, and—"

"My Lord! and yet he is an American citizen; but, go on my man," said Captain Baldwin.

"I will, sur."

"It was, as I was afther sayin' whin yer Honor says Oh Lord, and that I was an American citizen, and I was glad of it, sur, for with the famine in ould Ireland, and—"

"See here, my man, I wish you to tell me at once how you got that letter," sternly said Captain Baldwin, and turning to Buffalo Bill he added:

"You can have him as a scout, Cody, if you want him, for he is a new man and can learn to trail an Indian as soon as he can to be a soldier."

"Yis, sur, that's phwat I was afther sayin' to yez, sur—"

"Tell the story in your own way, my man, for I am officer of the night as well as the day, and time hangs heavy on my hands, while Chief Cody is used to keeping late hours, so just let us hear all about ould Ireland, St. Patrick, and any other interesting data you have on hand, while incidentally, while we are between the devil and the deep sea, drop in any information you may have of how you got that letter."

"Yis, sur, I'll be afther duing that same," was the complacent response of the Irish-American soldier.

Seeing that the man must tell the story in his own way, Captain Baldwin allowed him

to do so, and after fifteen minutes of real Irish comedy, it was learned that a horseman approached his post, was challenged, answered friend with the countersign, was told to dismount, advance and give the countersign, and he obeyed, in that he dismounted and handed over the letter for delivery to the scout.

CHAPTER LVI.

TO TEST THE LETTER.

CAPTAIN BALDWIN and Buffalo Bill at least enjoyed the story of the soldier, but when asked why he had not detained the man when he did not give the countersign, he very coolly replied:

"He was afther givin' me the letther, and sure I thought that was more thin the word."

"Thin he says good-avenin' as perlite as yez pl'ase, gives me a salute and walks back to his horse and whist—he was gone like a spook."

"What did he look like?"

"Loike a man, sur."

"Was he young or old, short or tall?"

"Sure and I didn't ask him his age, and he was about as tall as meself, maybe shorter, maybe taller."

"Did he have any beard?" asked the scout.

"Indade had he not."

"A smooth face?"

"I didn't fale it, sur."

"Was his face clean shaven, as yours is now?"

"Faith, it was not my face at all, but his own."

"No whiskers, no mustache?"

"Now yez is talkin' sur; he hed a moos-tache but it wasn't overgrown as I saw it in the darkness."

"He was alone?"

"Bedad I was with him."

"No one else?"

"His horse, and maybe it was a mule."

"You can go, my man," said Captain Baldwin quickly, and as the soldier departed the officer burst forth into a roar of laughter which Buffalo Bill heartily joined in.

"Talk about your Irish comedian, that fellow knocks them all out, and the manager who put him on the stage would make a fortune just to let him tell a story in his own way."

"I shall congratulate Captain Kelly upon his having such a man in his company and offer him an exchange for him; but Kelly is an Irishman himself and would never know the man was funny," and Captain Baldwin laughed again, while Buffalo Bill remarked:

"I'm of Irish descent myself, and I wonder if any of my ancestors were that fellow's match."

"There's no telling, Cody, for a generation or two in America civilizes a man wonderfully."

"Now that fellow's children may make a name for themselves, and his grandchild might be President some day, for this new country is a wonderland; but now to the letter?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do you suspect who could have left it?"

"I do not know who my unknown friend can be, captain; but I thank you for your kindness, sir."

"I thank you, Cody, for being the cause of my spending a most enjoyable hour."

"Come again and bring your friend with you," laughed the captain as Buffalo Bill walked away.

Returning to his quarters he read over the letter and then retired for the night; but as soon as was consistent with military etiquette he went up to headquarters to see the colonel.

Placing the whole affair before him, he gave the colonel a treat by his inimitable imitation of the soldier's way of telling the story, for Buffalo Bill is a splendid storyteller, and then they discovered the serious aspect of the case.

"Well, Cody, forewarned is being fore-armed at least," said the colonel.

"Yes, sir, I certainly have one good friend to warn me, and his warning will doubtless save my life, as I know that I am being shadowed by the Gold Ghouls, so can prepare against it."

"Yes, and I think it would be a good idea to carry out the insinuation made by Don Montebello, the Gold King, and give you a secret body-guard."

"Oh, no, sir, not that."

"Your men might shadow you, too, and be near to render aid if it was necessary."

"No, no, colonel; I would feel that I was haunted."

"It is bad enough sir, to be shadowed by one's foes, but far more to feel that your friends are dogging your steps to protect your life."

"I would feel like the Emperor of Russia, colonel, that I could not move without a guard and would have to wear an armor."

"I would feel very much the same way myself, Cody; but then, I do not wish you picked off by an outlaw."

"My men would avenge me?"

"Oh, yes, fully; but you would not be here to enjoy the satisfaction of knowing that you were avenged."

"But what will you do?"

"I shall put the letter to the test, sir."

"How do you mean?"

"I shall start out to Overland City to meet the coach, in a couple of days, coming in, taking the lower trail going, sir, and the upper one coming back."

"If you get back?"

"Well, colonel, that is a risk I must take, and the test of that letter must be made at once."

"I will act with all caution, sir."

The colonel said no more, and three days after Buffalo Bill rode away from the fort again on the trail for Overland City.

CHAPTER LVII.

THE OUTLAW CLAN.

SHERMAN CANFIELD and Gorman Field, after their disappointment in not finding the package of Sergeant Fessenden at the bottom of the river, where the former had stuck it with the sword, were preparing to start upon their return when a horseman was seen approaching.

They shrunk back in the thicket, Gorman saying quickly:

"On your life be still now!"

The horseman came along at a canter, passed the thicket, within twenty paces of the two in hiding, and Sherman Canfield had had a good view of him.

Before the youth could speak, Gorman said:

"Sherman, I told you that one of my conditions of your rescue was that you should not do any act that would lead to the killing or capture of the masked chief of the Gold Ghouls?"

"Yes, and I promised."

"True; but that you may not make any mistake, I am going to tell you a secret."

"I'll keep it."

"I made known to you that I was the only one of the band who had seen the chief unmasked."

"Yes."

"The only one who knew him as he was."

"True."

"Well, the horseman who just passed us was the chief."

"Can it be possible?"

"It is, but remember your promise?"

"I will."

"But it applies to the chief only."

"Yes, only to the chief."

"And that was the man?"

"It was."

"But he was not masked."

"No, not now, though he will be when he meets his men, for he always goes prepared."

"It is lucky he did not see us."

"Yes, for the chief and for ourselves."

"I might have squared it with him, but hardly without first giving you a hint."

"And somebody would have turned up their toes?"

"Exactly; but I'll tell you where the chief is going."

"You know?"

"I do; when he takes this trail, he has called a meeting of his men, and it is several miles from here."

"I wish we could see the meeting."

"We can see it, and hear, too, what is said."

"That's good!"

"I can cut over the ridge on foot, for our horses we will hide, and we can reach a point where we can look down upon the party, be within forty feet of them, and hear all they say."

"We'll do it," was Sherman Canfield's quick response.

The two then went to their horses and led them to a place where they would be secure.

It was just growing dark, and Gorman led the way by a steep trail up the side of the range.

Reaching the top they continued on in the gathering darkness and they at last came to a point, a cliff jutting out into a meadow.

"We must go slow here."

"Take your boots off and stick close behind me, for the slightest sound, or the knocking of a small rock over the cliff would betray us."

"Of course we would escape, for it is no easy matter to get up here, only we would miss hearing what was said."

"I'll be as silent as a ghost," whispered Sherman.

"Don't make such prophetic comparisons, Sherman, for we may both be ghosts before long," and with this significant remark Gorman Field led the way along the narrow point, which here and there was dotted by a pine or cedar tree of small growth.

As they progressed the point grew narrower, and there where it ended it was not six feet in width.

It went sheer down on each side for some fifty feet, and formed a center wall between two canyons.

From the canyon on the right, which was not very wide, the hum of voices came, and then the flash of a match.

Soon after a light was visible, and gaining in size it developed into a camp-fire.

Around this stood a number of men, and they were all masked.

Others continued to arrive one and two at a time, and they staked their horses out in a meadow near before they joined the group.

"There are a dozen trails leading to this place, and that is why the chief selected it as a rendezvous, for his men could come from their various stations," whispered Gorman.

"The chief has not come?"

"Yes, he stands apart there."

"He is masked now."

"Oh yes, and not a man in that crowd knows him when unmasked."

"There come more of them."

"Yes."

"How many there are."

"Count them."

Sherman did so.

"There are twenty-five with the chief."

"And more to come."

"There they are."

"Yes, three more."

"There should be one more, now I am away and Doyle is dead."

"There comes one more."

"Yes, it is the lieutenant, Brandon."

"That makes twenty-nine?"

"Yes, all that the bank numbers now, except distant spies who are not direct members."

"There are two more."

"Where?"

"Here! We are members in good standing," laughed Sherman.

"You would joke if you were dying, Sherman."

"It would be a good joke if those fellows were dying."

"Sh! the chief is going to speak," and as Gorman uttered the words the outlaw leader walked toward the group at the fire, and all turned and saluted him.

CHAPTER LVIII.

OVERHEARD.

THE hum of voices ceased around the camp-fire, as the outlaw clan turned to face their chief.

The scene was weird and picturesque with the group of masked men about the flickering fire, gazing upon the man who faced them, and whose form was enveloped in the long rubber coat that he wore.

"Men, I called you together to give you one order that must be executed."

"When that is done then there will be money in these mountains for us, and not before to the extent that I could wish."

"We have met with some reverses of late, for we had one man killed in a canyon not far from here, and I have since learned that his slayer was Buffalo Bill."

"Another of our band was severely wounded by the same Buffalo Bill."

"Then, too, we had a prisoner who escaped us, and whom my reward has not caused the recapture of."

Every word of the chief was uttered in a tone that reached the ears of the two listeners on the cliff, the current of the fire carrying the sound up distinctly.

Continuing he said:

"Another misfortune has been that one of our band turned traitor."

"But for the discovery of his treachery in time, Buffalo Bill and his demon scouts would have been secretly led into our retreat by night, caught us unprepared, and our necks would have been in the noose."

"He suffered as he deserved, and the young prisoner who escaped has been scared out of this country I am sure, preferring his life to his gold-mine."

"That gold-mine we must find, after we have accomplished the work in hand, and for which you are called together here to know about."

"There is still another misfortune that has beset us, in that we have lost one of our best men, a man whom I could wholly trust, for he was bound to me by the strongest ties."

"On his stanch friendship I could trust; but he has never seemed heart and soul in our work, though he was as true as steel."

"I refer to the commander of the retreat, in my absence and that of my lieutenant."

"He left us to go his way, sending me a letter saying that he felt that duty called him away and he would go, but not to doubt his honesty toward me."

"I do not doubt it, and I regret to have lost him, for I think most highly of him; but, had I known that he intended to desert me I would have driven my dagger to his heart."

"Had I even held a suspicion of his intention he should have died, for I hold no friendships that love of self-protection and gold is not paramount to."

"If I should cross his path again, regarding him as I do, I would lure him into my confidence and then kill him."

"I refer to this man Gorman merely to show you that the man I love must suffer as well as any other for our own protection and for gold."

"Now to the order I intended to give you, and to sugar-coat the pill, for it is no easy work, I shall offer a reward to the one who obeys it."

The men were all in deepest attention, and so were the two eavesdroppers on the cliff, one of whom had felt the words of the chief sink deep into his heart, for it showed him that the man whom he would not betray, or allow Sherman to fire upon or betray, was merciless toward him.

"My orders are," resumed the chief in his harsh way of speaking;

"That you kill Buffalo Bill!"

"He has been our bitterest foe, and no man is to be more feared than he."

"If we hold up a coach he and his buckskin braves are after us."

"If we raid a ranch he presses us so hard we lose half our cattle."

"If we strike the settlement for booty he runs us at a speed we have to throw it away to escape."

"When we think we have a coach with a treasure on it, up he looms with a dozen of his men as a guard and we have to lie low and let it go by."

"You have not forgotten how we once held up a coach we knew there was big money on, and found Buffalo Bill and his men passengers inside, and five of our band were killed."

"I tell you that he must be killed."

"We must drop all other work now to kill him."

"It will not do to shoot him down in Overland City, for that would bring destruction upon us all."

"But he must be killed on the sly, shot down on the trail."

"Go singly, go in twos and threes to the

different trails, go any way so you shadow that man to his death, and the one who brings me his scalp, with proof that Buffalo Bill is a dead man, I will pay to him the reward of one thousand dollars and make him second officer of the Gold Ghouls band.

"You know now why you are called together, and what your duties are for the next week, month or year, until you kill that man."

"When this has been done this country will be a bonanza for the Gold Ghouls, and every one of us will be enriched."

"Address me as before, and now that there is no danger of our retreat being found, through the escape of that boy prisoner, we will return there, and twice each week will I be there to learn what you are doing."

"You have your orders, obey them!" and walking to where his horse was the chief leaped into the saddle and rode away.

CHAPTER LIX.

SHERMAN CANFIELD'S RESOLVE.

A SILENCE like death rested upon the crowd after the departure of the chief, who had shown such a malignant hatred of Buffalo Bill.

"Why do they not go?" whispered Sherman.

"They are not allowed to leave until fifteen minutes after the departure of the chief."

"Then the lieutenant will go, and the men will follow in twos, threes and fours."

"They are well disciplined."

"You bet they are."

"He did not slight you in his speech."

"No, he took particular pains to mention me, and I shall remember his words."

"Though I would not kill him, save in defending my life against him, for I remember all he has done for me, I yet shall not be so very particular in requesting you not to draw a bead on him, only let his band go first, saving the best for the last, you know, for he can be found any time."

"And so they are to go back to the retreat?"

"Yes, let them, for all like it, and more can be found there at any time than at the old place."

"But all those men do not stay there?"

"No, about half a score live in Overland City, the mining-camps and settlements."

"You heard what he said about Buffalo Bill?"

"Every word."

"Well, I feel toward Buffalo Bill as you did toward the chief, for he saved me from being hanged, as I told you."

"I do not wonder at it; but there goes the lieutenant."

"And will no one follow him right away?"

"Not for five minutes."

"And then?"

"They will begin to disperse, as I said, in small parties."

"With time between each departure?"

"Yes, but that is not because they are unknown, but so that they will not appear on the trails in force."

"I see; but do none of the men ever follow the chief, to try and see who he is?"

"They do not dare to, boy pard."

"Why not?"

"Well, they do not know which one of them is a spy of the chief to see who would do such a thing."

"I understand now."

"It is dog eat dog, or the band run under the spy system," said Sherman.

"It is just that, and again I thank you for getting me out of a very bad scrape, one that looms up in its evil and abhorrent features more and more each day."

"Just think, I was that man's spy; but the men are beginning to separate now."

"See, they are putting out the fire."

They remained crouching in their position until they saw the last of the outlaw band ride away in the darkness, now greater after the bright light of the fire shining in their eyes for so long a while.

"Now we can go, Sherman."

"I am ready."

"You heard what they intended to do with Buffalo Bill?"

"Oh, yes."

"Do you doubt their intention?"

"Oh, no."

"What then?"

"Well, Buffalo Bill has managed to live right along thus far without being killed, and I have a faith he is too noble a man to go under by a bullet from a Gold Ghoul."

"All men are mortal."

"Yes, but I intend to put him upon his guard."

"You will go to the fort?"

"Only to warn him."

"I am resolved to give up the hunt for gold, like the outlaws, until I can save Buffalo Bill."

"How can it be done?"

"I'll tell you."

"I am with you heart and soul in the work, Sherman."

"I know that."

"Well, what can be done?"

"You heard the lieutenant, after the chief left, say that Buffalo Bill, he had heard, was to take dispatches to the weekly coach leaving and going to Overland City?"

"Yes."

"He also said that though there were as many as five different trails from the fort to Overland City, Buffalo Bill always went by one or two of them."

"So he said."

"Well, my idea is to haunt those trails ourselves, having a rendezvous where we can meet each other every night."

"Good!"

"If the outlaws shadow Buffalo Bill, we can shadow them, and if we cannot warn him in some way, we can be on hand to kill those who lie in ambush for him."

"Sherman, you are a dandy."

"I tell you we can do it, Pard Gorman, and thus protect the scout."

"But I will write him a warning letter and take it by night to the fort, for I shall keep in hiding until I find the sergeant's gold-mine, and that will put him on his guard."

"I shall, with your aid, track those outlaws to their place of ambush, and when they are ready to pull trigger, we can chip in."

"We can and will."

"And I'll be settling a score I owe them for trying to hang me, as I am sure some of them there to-night were the Ranger Regulators masked."

"Some are."

"You have keen eyes, boy pard; but then there are Ranger Regulators who are not Gold Ghouls and do not suspect any of their band of being."

"That may be; but there is another score to settle, for they had me a prisoner, caused me to lose the sergeant's papers, were going to kill me, and worse still, they went and killed my poor comrades."

"I tell you, Pard Gorman, I am on the war path to shadow the shadowers of Buffalo Bill, and to avenge my comrades."

"And I am with you."

"We'll go now and hunt up a retreat," was Gorman's reply.

CHAPTER LX.

SHADOWING THE SHADOWERS.

REGAINING their horses, Gorman and Sherman Canfield rode rapidly away toward the rendezvous which the former had in mind as the best hiding-place for them.

Knowing the country as he did, he felt that the place he would seek no one would go there for, unless it was for hiding, or in following a trail.

To prevent leaving a trail, when they got near the spot and had to leave the main trail they had been following, they muffled the hoofs of their horses.

By this means no tracks were left, and the spot was reached with no dread of being trailed there.

"You see this little canyon, Sherman?"

"Yes, pard."

"Well, it is a canyon in canyons."

"How so?"

"It is a small canyon, but with water, grass and wood in plenty, and it is walled in by rocks."

"So it seems to be by night."

"Now around this canyon is a larger one, this being a small one in a kind of a mountain."

"I see."

"Around the other is a range of mountains that form a large valley."

"Yes."

"Now through this valley, which is miles wide, every trail to and from Fort Rattle to Overland City runs."

"That is in our favor."

"Greatly."

"But you see this towering peak above us?"

"Yes, it is a sugar loaf mountain."

"It is known as the Monument, and there are plenty of graves at its base."

"In the first place there were a number of Indian battles here, and the dead were buried here."

"The troops had a fight with the redskins in the big canyon, and the dead of both sides were buried near."

"A stage-coach load was massacred here by road-agents some years ago, some of these very Gold Ghouls being among the robbers, and their graves you will see in the morning near where we now are."

"Any more?"

"Well, yes, for some miners once came here gold-hunting, and one of them boasted that they had struck it rich, so others came and there was a general fight in which a dozen were killed, and they are buried here."

"Did they get any gold?"

"Not an ounce, for there was none to get."

"The miners say this canyon is haunted, and no one ever comes near it, and that tall mountain-peak is called, as I said, the Monument, being a natural monument for all the slain."

"It is very high."

"That is our strong point, for you can go up to the top, and from there you can look over the range into Overland settlement, see Overland City and mining-camps, and away off in this direction, Fort Rattle."

"Your glass is a good one, and you could see a man on foot leave the fort, and which trail he took."

"Whichever way he went you could head him off almost on foot, and if any outlaws were watching and made a break to get into the trail ahead of him, you could see them."

"This is the very spot, Pard Gorman."

"It is; but for the present you had better watch the main trail, for as Buffalo Bill has not been warned, and he will be carrying dispatches, he will be sure to take that one, and it runs along the ridge three miles to our right, and which can only be ascended at certain points."

"Yes."

"Now I will show you all these points by daylight, and we'll take in the whole country with our glasses."

"Our horses will be safe here, and at night we can build fires and cook our food, but not by daylight, as the smoke would be seen."

"To-morrow night I will go to our retreat leaving you on guard, and bring back provisions and ammunition enough to last us, and more blankets."

"I will come back the following night, and then go on duty with you."

This plan having been arranged, the two pards went into camp for the night and cooked provisions sufficient to last them for the next day, after which they turned in for the night.

The following day, from the summit of Monument Mountain, they looked over the country with their glasses and Sherman Canfield familiarized himself with the whole country.

That night at dark Gorman departed for the retreat to procure supplies, and the next morning Sherman Canfield was on duty alone.

He was at his post on the summit of his lookout at sunrise, and saw a horseman ride away from Fort Rattle.

He at once decided to cross to the ridge, along the base of which the main trail ran, for he saw that the horseman was going that way.

He took a dog-trot on foot, his rifle in hand, and reaching the ridge at the point where it could be ascended, was soon on the summit.

Before he could exactly get his bearings, however, and get into a position, the horseman had gone by, but yet Sherman got a look at him a few hundred yards away and

recognized the tall form, broad sombrero and long flowing hair of Buffalo Bill.

"He will come back this trail I feel sure," he muttered, and soon after he saw another horseman pass, and one whom he eyed most closely through his glass, as he passed along the trail, going toward the fort.

An hour after he beheld two horsemen coming along the trail.

They seemed to be trailing some one, and soon after took their horses over by the river, hitched them, and then came to a pile of rocks and sat down.

They wore masks and were Gold Ghouls.

At once Sherman Canfield slipped back along the ridge, and sitting down on the edge of the cliff waited.

He wrote something on a slip of paper, tied it to a rock, and two hours after tossed it down into the trail.

Then he ran back along the ridge and took up a position over the two men in ambush.

The result the reader knows.

It was that night that he rode to the fort, blacking his upper lip to appear like a mustache, and gave the letter to the Irish soldier to give to Buffalo Bill.

Soon after his return Gorman rode into the camp in the little canyon on his return with supplies, and learned what had happened.

CHAPTER LXI.

DEFYING DEATH.

WHEN he rode away from the fort upon his second run to Overland City with dispatches, Buffalo Bill seemed to defy death in going in the face of the warning he had received.

But he went by one trail, was a couple of hours in Overland City, and returned by another and had not met friend or foe on the way.

On his third ride he came upon a stick in the middle of the trail. In the top, which was split, was a piece of paper, and opening it the scout read:

"A Masked Gold Ghoul is lying in wait for you behind Elephant Rock. He is alone, but means to kill you if he can."

"Thanks, my Unknown Protector, for the information.

"I'll just flank Elephant Rock and rope in that gentleman."

The scout at once left the trail, made a flank movement, and came up behind the rock, which had obtained its name from being strangely like a giant elephant.

On the top of the rock, lying at full length, was a man, his rifle leveled up the trail.

But he uttered a cry of alarm when behind him came the words:

"Come down, pard; I want you!"

He turned a masked face upon the speaker, tried to bring his rifle to bear, and tumbled off the rock with a bullet in his brain.

The scout had been too quick for him and put in a shot from his revolver.

"Ah! another of Overland City's good citizens. I'll carry him in on his horse, which must be near here," Buffalo Bill decided, as he removed the mask from the face and recognized a man he had often seen before.

"His name is Brandon, I think, but I had no idea he was a Gold Ghoul, for he is one of the Regulators, too."

It was Brandon the Gold Ghoul lieutenant, who had played a lone hand and lost the game.

An hour after, Buffalo Bill rode into Overland City, leading a horse, across the saddle of which was tied a dead form.

His arrival created a sensation and a large crowd gathered.

"My guardian angel protected me again, Don, for I was warned to have an eye out for breakers ahead," said the scout, addressing the Don who had ridden up and who replied:

"Brandon an outlaw? I would never have suspected it! but I congratulate you, and I only wish I had such a protecting spirit."

"I have four scalps now for my tepee," said the scout, holding up the mask.

"But was he a Gold Ghoul?" asked a man bluntly.

"He was lying in ambush for me; he wore

this mask and this pin on his hat, and that is the Gold Ghoul badge. Being warned I got in my shot first," and Buffalo Bill turned his piercing eyes upon the man who had asked the question in a way that appeared as though he wished to cause trouble.

But the man did not reply or press the matter further, and soon after Buffalo Bill rode out of the camp upon his return, taking the same trail back to the fort.

He reached the fort without adventure and placing the three gold badges upon the colonel's desk said modestly:

"Another secret badge and another scalp, colonel."

"The colonel was astounded; and when he had heard the story said earnestly:

"You are indeed shadowed, Cody, by foes and friends."

"It seems so, sir, and I can find out who my foe-shadowers are, but not my friend-shadower."

"True, and it costs a life to find it out; but, if this is kept up without harm to you, even the large band of Gold Ghouls cannot stand the drain."

"I shall still continue my rides, colonel, though this killing business is a bad one; and yet, I suppose some one must be executioner."

"I've a mind to order you to stay at the fort, or send an escort with you, Cody."

"Don't do it, colonel, either way, I beg, sir; for, do you not see that I have a secret escort, that surely protects me? I hope it will continue so."

"Heaven grant it," was the colonel's fervent answer, and when he saw Buffalo Bill start on his fourth dispatch-bearing mission, it was with a feeling of deep misgiving as to the result, and a strong desire to send an escort of scouts to follow him.

But he had the strongest confidence in the chief of scouts, and felt that he was doing that which would bring outlawry to an end, though at terrible personal risk.

Buffalo Bill had reported to him that Doctor Dillon and Scout Ernest were beginning to fasten strong suspicion upon half a dozen men in Overland City, as being allies of the Gold Ghouls, and that the circle of doom was being drawn about them.

CHAPTER LXII.

UNMASKING THE MASKERS.

THERE was not a shadow upon the face of Buffalo Bill as he rode away in the early morning from the fort, to go for the fourth time on his dispatch-bearing run.

The colonel in his anxiety had risen early to see him off and wish him God speed, and as he rode away could hardly refrain from sending, as has been said, his scouts after him.

"Which trail do you take to-day, Cody?" the colonel had asked.

"The cliff trail, sir, where I got my first warning."

"May it not be the last," was the low response.

Why he took the cliff trail that morning Buffalo Bill did not really know, but something prompted him to do so.

It was a trail where he could guard against an ambush fairly well, save at the spot where the two maskers had been.

In approaching that barrier the cliff made a sharp bend before it got to it, and by dismounting there, leaving his horse and going to the river he could flank any one who was in ambush there without being seen.

That he would receive another warning he could hardly believe.

"He was nearing the bend and about to halt when a horseman came in sight."

"Ah, the Don!"

"There will be trouble sure, for he is a bird of ill-omen," said the scout.

But the Don was all smiles, and as polite as a dancing-master.

He shook hands with the scout, talked with him for a few minutes, and then said he was going to the fort, and would not be turned from his intention as he had been before by remembering that he had to go to a distant camp.

As the scout started on, Montebello, the Gold King, looked back, turned his horse quickly, drew his revolver and was raising it to take deliberate aim at Buffalo Bill who

was not twenty feet from him, when a sharp report rung out from the top of the cliff and a bullet crashed down through the top of the head of the intended assassin.

Buffalo Bill wheeled his horse quickly, drawing his revolver as he did so, and was astounded to see Montebello, the Gold King, fall from his saddle, while his horse darted off from the trail.

He looked upward and there, floating away from the cliff-top, was a suspicious little cloud of bluish smoke.

Ere he could collect his wits as to what it all meant, he heard a shot from around the cliff and at once spurred his horse in that direction.

Before he rounded the sharp curve, however, several shots were fired, sounding above his head and on a level with him, and the next moment he dashed into view of a strange sight.

One masked man lay dead, another was on his knees and firing upward, while a third, with one arm in a sling, also had his revolver pointed at the top of the cliff.

Seeing the scout, the latter gave vent to a mild yell and leveled on him, and two revolvers flashed almost together.

The result was that Buffalo Bill's splendid horse fell dead, while the masked Gold Ghoul, with his arm in a sling, followed the animal's example and toppled over.

"If you are not Death Notch Dick, I'll smoke a pipe of powder," cried Buffalo Bill, as he sprung from the ground, having fallen with his horse, and made a run toward the outlaw he had killed, for the wounded one he had seen on his knees now lay silent upon his face.

Tearing off the mask, he revealed the face of Death Notch Dick, and bounding to the other two he unmasked them, too, recognizing both of them as men he had seen about the settlement, one being none other than the captain of the Ranger Regulators!

Just as he looked upward he heard a shout, and the words:

"Hurrah for Buffalo Bill!"

"We'll come down and join you."

"If that is not my boy pard, my right-bower, lucky star, or whatever I choose to call him, I'll give up scouting," and Buffalo Bill shouted back:

"Come right down here, boy pard, and come a-jumping."

With this he walked back around the bend, giving his dead horse an affectionate caress and a kind word as he went by, while he dashed a tear from his eyes as he said:

"We have been on many a trail together, dear old fellow, but this is your last one, and you caught the bullet intended for me."

The elegantly-clad form of Montebello, the Gold King, lay where it had fallen, and walking up to it, Buffalo Bill saw that the bullet had crashed through the large hat and sped down through the head.

It was some little time before he saw his Lucky Star coming, and he was not alone, for Gorman Field was with him.

Sherman Canfield ran up and grasped the scout's hand and cried:

"I did not intend to let you know yet; but, Mr. Cody, that man is the Chief of the Gold Ghouls. You killed Brandon the lieutenant on your next run, and my pard Gorman, here, thought it best we should let you know now, so the balance of the gang could be corralled right off."

"Well, boy pard, it was a lucky day for me that I saved you from the Ranger Regulators, for you have saved my life time and again."

CHAPTER LXIII.

THE SECRET OUT.

It was half an hour before explanations had been made enough by Sherman Canfield to satisfy Buffalo Bill, and then the youth said earnestly:

"Now, Mr. Cody, I am going to intrust to you a secret."

"This is Gorman Field with me, my pard. He has been like an elder brother to me, and what has been done could not have been accomplished without his aid; in fact, he has done nearly all."

"The truth is, Mr. Field has had a hard life of it, and he was driven to join the outlaws; but he aided me to escape, then joined me, and together we planned to save you."

"We did intend to go on a hunt for the sergeant's gold-mine, for I wished to find it before I went to the fort, after my pledge to him, a dying man, and I had lost the package he had given me, for I stuck it to the bottom of the river with the sword to keep the Gold Ghouls from getting it."

"But if Gorman Field goes to Overland the miners will kill him for a past offense which they believed him guilty of, though since they have found out who the guilty one was. So he is going with me to hunt up the sergeant's mine and help work it. I thus can keep my pledge. He will go there at once, while I will go with you and pick out the Gold Ghouls and guide you to the retreat, for I know it well."

Buffalo Bill listened attentively to the youth, and then stepped forward and grasped the hand of the ex-outlaw while he said:

"I owe more to you, pard, than I can ever repay, and your secret will be safe."

Then turning to Sherman Canfield he continued:

"See here, Lucky Star, you say you stuck that package in the river with the sergeant's sword?"

"Yes, sir, the day the Gold Ghouls corralled me in the river."

"It was tied up in an oil-cloth coat and rubber blanket, and I stuck the sword through the leather strings I tied it with."

"I found it!"

"You found it?" almost shrieked the youth.

"Yes."

"Where?"

"In the river."

"When?"

"To-day."

"Now please tell me how?"

"I was crossing the ford, and went a little further down than usual, when, as I halted by the big rock in the center of the stream, to let my horse drink, I glance down through the water and saw an object that the sun shone on glittering on the bottom."

"It was against the base of the rock and held there by the current, which moved it up and down."

"I lowered my lasso coil and after awhile pulled it up and found it a sword fastened to a rubber blanket, in which something had been secretly wrapped."

"I had no time to examine it there, as I wished to carry the dispatches through in time for the coach, so fastened it to my saddle, sword and all, and it is there now."

"Come and get it."

They went to the dead horse and there, sure enough, were the sword and package fastened to the saddle.

Sherman quickly released the bundle, and then said:

"Mr. Cody, you have done me as much good as you did when you saved me from the Ranger Regulators."

"But, what is to be done now?"

"Find out where these dead outlaws left their horses."

"I know; they were a quarter of a mile from here."

"I will go and bring them up," said Gorman and he walked rapidly away, while Buffalo Bill remarked:

"I have lost a splendid horse, but there is his match, and I appropriate him to ride to Overland City and the fort, for he belongs to you, as you fired the shot that killed the chief."

"Then accept him as a present from me, sir, and I'll catch him for you now."

The fine animal was caught and brought up, and Buffalo Bill said that he would accept him under the circumstances, as an outlaw's property belonged to the captor.

"Now, Mr. Cody, let me tell you that this bundle you see on his saddle, contains his mask, cloak, robe and a hump, for Gorman told me that he wore a false hump to disguise his form, and always spoke in a changed voice, while he is not a Mexican, but a Canadian, and as Montebello, the Gold King, affected an accent in his speech he did not have."

"He played it well; but here comes Pard Gorman. Now we'll gather the bodies and then I wish you to do some courier duty for me."

"Certainly, sir."

"Go with all speed to the fort and ask

Colonel Carr to please send my scouts here, and a troop of cavalry as well, for it would raise a riot to take the Don's body into Overland City without a good force, for no one would believe at first he was guilty."

"Ride the Don's horse, now I think of it, and come back on one of mine with the troops."

It took Sherman Canfield just a minute to mount and get away, and he went off like a rocket, leaving Buffalo Bill and Gorman Field together with the dead.

For awhile they talked, and then Buffalo Bill said:

"Now, pard, you can go and get your horse and Sherman's, and bring his here."

"Then my advice is that you at once start for your retreat up near the mine. Your boy pard will come there and join you when the trouble blows over, and, having the map, now, he can readily find the sergeant's mine."

"He will go with me into Overland City, and the men he knows belong to the outlaw band he will point out and I will bag, after which we will strike the retreat and clean those out who are there."

"I think I had better go with you, sir, for I do not like to run off like a coward."

"You are no coward, for I remember you well now, and I am glad you told me your story."

"But, I recall the charge against you in the mines, and that it was proven false; but you would get into trouble. So go to the mine, and when the Gold Ghouls are wiped out, no one will know you as once an outlaw, and our boy pard and I will keep the secret."

Thus urged Gorman Field did as Buffalo Bill requested; and, having brought Sherman's horse to the scene, he bade the scout good-by and rode away.

CHAPTER LXIV.

THE ROUND-UP.

It was a proud moment for Sherman Canfield when he came up to the spot where Buffalo Bill stood, riding by the side of Colonel Carr who had himself come to the scene of the tragedy, the youth telling his story as they rode along together.

Besides the colonel's escort of an aide and squad of cavalry, Captain Baldwin's troop had come along, and a score of Buffalo Bill's scouts.

A wild cheer broke forth as they all beheld their chief standing by the dead bodies of Montebello and his band.

The colonel and Buffalo Bill had a short, earnest talk; then the bodies were placed in an ambulance that had been brought along, and the march was taken up for Overland City.

Buffalo Bill rode in advance as scout, with Sherman Canfield by his side, and following came half of the scouts.

Then the colonel and his escort, the troop following, with the ambulance behind it and the rest of the scouts bringing up the rear.

There was a stir in Overland City when the cavalcade appeared, and as men came along whom Sherman Canfield recognized as outlaws they were seized, while the names of the Regulators who were also secretly Gold Ghouls, having been furnished by Gorman Field, they also were arrested, though not without fatal results in some cases where they resisted.

When Colonel Carr himself denounced Don Montebello the Gold King, as the chief of the Gold Ghouls, and ordered a lieutenant to take a squad of men and seize his house and effects, the bewildered people realized that there was more guilt in Overland City than they had ever supposed.

Leaving Captain Baldwin and his troop in charge of Overland City, Colonel Carr returned to the fort, while Buffalo Bill and his scouts dashed away, under the guidance of Sherman Canfield for the secret retreat of the outlaws.

They entered it at night, before a warning could be given, and the dozen men found there, though surprised, fought desperately and no mercy was shown them.

"My comrades are avenged at last," said Sherman Canfield as he stood gazing over the canyon at the bodies of the dead, revealed by the glare of a dozen camp-fires.

Laden with plunder the scouts next day returned to the fort to find that short work

had been made of those who were really guilty, for Colonel Carr had ordered an immediate trial by court martial and sentence of death had been quickly pronounced upon them, and was almost as speedily executed.

Sherman Canfield found himself a young hero, and was given an officer's salute when ever he went about the fort.

But, after a few days' stay there, he and Buffalo Bill having carefully gone over the sergeant's map together, he started with the chief and Captain Baldwin, to whose troop Sergeant Fessenden had belonged, in search of the mine, Mrs. Fessenden having already been written to of her husband's sad death.

CHAPTER LXV.

CONCLUSION.

THE map told the story, and the sergeant's mine was found with little difficulty. The gold already dug out was also found, and amounted to some twenty thousand dollars.

But the mine had panned out about all there was in it, and so Sherman Canfield and Gorman Field would not touch their share, leaving all for the wife and daughter of the sergeant.

Soon after Sherman started East, as a letter came from the sergeant's wife, urging him to do so, and Gorman Field accompanied him.

They visited the sergeant's widow in her pleasant home, and Sherman told her the whole story of her husband's death, but firmly refused to accept any of her little fortune.

Then he went to Gorman Field's home and found out just how the land lay there, and that the fugitive was never believed guilty of his brother's murder, under the circumstances, after his letter had been read, and a handsome property was there awaiting his coming back.

So back Gorman Field went and claimed his own, Sherman remaining his guest for several weeks, after which he started for his home in Omaha, where a joyous welcome awaited him from his family.

But though Sherman Canfield returned once more to college for a year or so, he went on several trips again to the Wild West, meeting with numerous adventures, and few who know him to-day suspect the strange life he has led with his friends for life, Gorman Field and Buffalo Bill, the Prince of the Platte, as he is often called in Nebraska.

THE END.

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